



RUSSIA, INTERPOL, AND NORTH CAUCASUS DIASPORAS IN EUROPE

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Policy Brief presented at the
BEAR-PONARS Eurasia Conference
“Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation”

April 29-30, 2022,
Washington, DC

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Autocratic regimes have long abused the Interpol Red Notice system to target exiled political opponents and refugees. As underlined by Freedom House, Russia [“is perhaps the world’s most prolific abuser of the Interpol notice system” being responsible for 38% of all Red Notices in the world.](#) Since 2015, Russia has used the Interpol Red Notice system to increase its reach over North Caucasus migrants in the European Union and in Ukraine. Many of those are individuals who left Russia because of political and religious repression resulting from the Chechen wars and the counter-terrorist operation in the North Caucasus. They lived abroad for years enjoying a relative protection from Russia and its repressive tool. If before, most cases of extradition and deportation were denied by European states based on human rights imperative, the situation changed recently with the fear of terrorist activities in Europe. Following the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) and the wave of foreign fighters heading to Syria, many North Caucasus migrants were targeted by Russia and often falsely accused of belonging to IS cells in Europe and in Ukraine, being returning foreign fighters or having participated in illegal armed formations in Russia.

[According to human rights activists and lawyers](#), Russia often provided fake and unreliable evidence when requesting extradition of migrants. Even though the information often could not be corroborated, European governments agreed to deport over a dozen migrants based on Russia’s unchallenged information.

In 2017, a Chechen asylum seeker in Germany, Khusein Gadamauri, was extradited to Russia and subsequently killed in a special operation in the North Caucasus. Even in cases where the extradition processes are denied by the legal system or the prosecutor’s office, migrants spend considerable time in detention fighting their extradition process. Based on information provided by the Russian state, [Mansur Sadulaev](#), a Chechen activist, was identified as a threat to European security, arrested in Sweden, and faced risks of extradition to Russia. Even though, the extradition request was refused by the Swedish prosecutor, Sadulaev had to fight the charges against him while in custody.

In other cases, migrants and asylum seekers are simply deported to Russia even if risks to their life exist. Since the end of the Russian counterterrorist operation in Chechnya, many European countries have considered Russia as a safe third country and trusted human rights guarantee provided by Moscow. In 2018, Azamat Baiduyev who received subsidiary protection in Poland in 2008 was deported to Russia as he was deemed a threat to public safety in Poland. He was previously suspected of a possible involvement in terrorist attacks in Belgium, but never accused of such crime or provided with any evidence of his illegal activities. Faced with the threat of deportation, Baiduyev tried to commit suicide rather than returning to Russia. [He was finally deported to Russia and subsequently abducted by police forces in Chechnya.](#) Even though, an Interpol Red Notice cannot be placed on refugees by the country where the individual fears persecution; Interpol and host countries can make certain exceptions including cases where national security is at stake or linked to serious international crimes like terrorism. [In 2021, Magomed Gadaev was deported from France even though credible risks for his life and well-being](#)

[existed violating international human rights law](#). Gadaev was also deemed a risk to French national security following a counter-terrorist investigation.

During the same period, a group of Chechen veterans fighting in Ukraine for the Sheikh Mansur battalion were also targeted by Russia using the Interpol Red Notice system. [Russia added many of those fighters on the Interpol list accusing them of membership in IS or other terrorist organizations](#). Even though Ukraine promised to many of them that they would not be deported to Russia and be granted refugee status or citizenship after the war, the situation started to change in 2015. The Minsk Accords left some of those war veterans in a precarious situation as Ukraine started to collaborate with Russia in matters related to Interpol and counterterrorism. For example, in 2018, Timur Tumgoev was deported from Ukraine and subsequently arrested and tortured by the Russian government. More recently, the Ukrainian parliament voted a law providing citizenship to volunteers who fought against Russia in the Donbas and preventing them to be deported to Russia; however, some volunteers lacked proper paperwork to regulate their situation.

The Russian abuses to the Interpol system in Ukraine were not limited to volunteers who fought in the Donbas but extend to ordinary North Caucasus asylum seekers. Many were accused by Moscow of belonging to illegal armed formations in Russia or having fought for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Such accusations appear to be based on uncorroborated information and used for political purposes. In any case, several extradition procedures were launched against those asylum seekers and migrants. [Before the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, many North Caucasus migrants lived in fear of being deported to Russia](#).

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, future collaboration between Ukraine and Russia appears unlikely, providing an additional level of protection to North Caucasus migrants and asylum seekers. However, the effect of the Interpol system extends beyond the extradition itself. [Interpol notices can hinder individuals from traveling internationally, preventing them to secure refugee status in another country or even secure employment and a simple bank account](#). In very few cases, with the help of specialized lawyers and human rights organization, migrants can manage to get their name removed from Interpol list.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine: a new chapter for North Caucasus migrants

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine introduces a whole new array of challenges for North Caucasus migrants and their host countries. Although cooperation with Russia in matters of counterterrorism, international crime, and Interpol activities will probably not stop with the war in Ukraine, it will provide the occasion for Western states to review how they deal with the question of Russian migrants and Interpol cooperation in the context of a new Cold war. After all, Red Notices are based on a spirit of collaboration between government aimed at locating international wanted persons, they are not mandatory arrest warrants to be implemented by host countries. States have the freedom to collaborate or not with foreign governments and more importantly the duty to review thoroughly evidence presented by other countries. If in the past, EU states appeared too lenient toward Russian request for extradition and deportation, the EU

governments might choose to provide the benefit of the doubt to Russian citizens presenting asylum requests rather than cooperating with Russia through the Interpol system.

In terms of counterterrorism, EU countries will then be faced with the challenge to properly assess the case of Russian refugees in an environment of reduced cooperation with Russia. Even though Russia abused the Interpol system for years, the threat emanating from North Caucasus diasporas should not be downplayed by European officials. Many Russian-speaking former foreign fighters in Syria have used the flow of Russian refugees to travel to the European Union and Ukraine. [For example, two suspected fighters were arrested at the Polish-Belarus border in 2016](#). In 2019, in Ukraine, [a military commander of the Islamic State--al-Bara Shishani, a Georgian national--was arrested near Kyiv](#). [Local researchers and journalists](#) as well [SBU officials](#) have estimated that hundreds of former fighters from Syria had moved to Ukraine after the collapse of the Islamic State. In the fog of war of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the whereabouts of those fighters remain mostly unknown. Locating and properly assessing the future refugee claims of those extremists appears to be an upcoming challenge facing the European Union. Immigration authorities will have to strengthen their due diligence procedures to fulfill their legal obligations toward all refugees as well as increasing their intelligence gathering targeted at extremist groups based in Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey.

For refugees from Russia previously living in Ukraine and fleeing the war, Interpol Red Notices will impact their ability to safely access the European Union. For example, Amina Gerikhanova, a Chechen refugee who fled Russia in 2016 and was living in Ukraine, was detained with her son by the Romanian border police as she fled the war in Ukraine in March 2022. [A Romanian court ordered her deportation to Russia as Moscow claimed that she previously joined the Islamic State in Syria](#). However, the deportation procedure was [recently suspended by the European Court of Human Rights](#). In Germany, [the government has refused to allow some Russian citizens fleeing the war to submit asylum demands including people that have fled Russia years ago and previously sought refuge in Ukraine](#). Such situations risk of becoming more common with the flow of refugees coming from Ukraine. Legitimate Russian political refugees who often fled repression at home should not fall victim of the current hard stance adopted by Western countries against Russia in support of Ukraine. Host countries must differentiate between asylum demands presented by Russian citizens taking into consideration the overall history of the applicants and the level of risk associated with their refoulement. If not, legitimate political refugees might become collateral damage of broader geopolitical tensions with Russia. Furthermore, in the future, European countries should reconsider their assessment of Russia as a safe third country for North Caucasus migrants and asylum seekers, particularly Chechens.