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THE ROANOKE TIMES

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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Irina and Damir Kantimerov share a moment after their asylum hearing in Northern Virginia on Sept. 27.

Asylum seekers find their way to Roanoke

A year ago, Damir and Irina fled Russia and a war they didn't support

HEATHER ROUSSEAU
The Roanoke Times

The young couple from Roanoke stood outside the courthouse on a warm September morning, waiting nervously for their immigration case to be heard inside.

Damir Kantimerov, dressed in a dark blue suit and with a red tie,

took the hand of his wife, Irina, as the pair entered the three-story, brick building plopped down in a Northern Virginia suburb. Irina's hair was partially tied back with blue and yellow ribbons, the now-familiar colors of the Ukrainian flag. Her dark blue blazer matched her husband's suit. Damir's younger brother, Daian, also seeking asylum, was with them, dressed in business attire.

Just before they entered, a man approached. "Are you lawyers?" he asked, speaking with a His-

panic accent that they couldn't understand.

"Are you lawyers?" the man repeated.

The trio shook their heads, and the man walked away. They did not tell him so, but they are doctors.

They are also asylum seekers.

One year ago, Damir and Irina boarded an airplane in Moscow bound for the western coast of Turkey with their young son, Daniial, and Damir's brother. They bought round-trip tickets for a beach vacation that they

had no plans to take. The vacation ruse covered up the fact that they were escaping Russia, fleeing their country that had launched a war in neighboring Ukraine, the country of Irina's birth, a war they did not support. They left behind friends and colleagues who supported both the war and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

They believed their lives were at risk, especially because they were in the medical field, and

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Goodwill outlines contractor choices

Contractor committed to hiring local subcontractors for Melrose Plaza project

JEFF STURGEON
The Roanoke Times

The Roanoke Goodwill organization says there is still room for local contractor participation in its dynamic Melrose Plaza project despite the hiring of Richmond-based contractors to lead it.

The general contractor selected, Kjellstrom & Lee, has committed to hire local subcontractors and held a type of job fair to build relationships with area companies, according to Goodwill Industries of the Valleys.

The Roanoke Times received an anonymous outside letter that questioned the fairness of the contractor-selection process. Goodwill subsequently outlined which companies sought to be hired, which were chosen and how much they will be paid.

In addition to the Kjellstrom organization, Richmond architecture firm Enteros Design is also under contract to steer the four-part community center to conclusion. Officials, who will stage a groundbreaking this month, say the center will have a grocery store, bank, clinic and school at Melrose Avenue and 24th Street Northwest. It is one of Goodwill's largest local efforts and received \$10 million of the city's \$64.5 million in pandemic relief money. The estimated cost

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Raising money for rare patients

Johanna Sweet and Keith Little carry a burden far heavier than most parents.

Their 9-year-old daughter, Emma, suffers from a rare genetic condition that makes her skin super-sensitive to light. Xeroderma Pigmentosum, or XP, affects fewer than one in a million people. Emma's the only Virginian with the diagnosis, her mom said.

Unlike most everyone, the third-grader's skin cannot repair

harm caused by ultraviolet rays. Even 1 second of UV exposure will cause permanent damage, said Sweet, an associate professor at Roanoke College. (Little is a chaplain for Carilion Clinic.)

Emma's condition has forced the divorced couple into extraordinary measures. Emma wears at least two layers of clothing almost all the time. Thrice daily she applies sunblock. Emma also has extra-dry eyes, which she moistens with serum custom-made from Sweet's blood in a lab.

And for years, Emma walked around wearing an upper-body cov-

ering that resembles an astronaut's helmet. She still wears it occasionally, although more recently the family has devised a less restrictive way.

The headgear sports a battery-powered fan to keep the little girl comfortable. Sweet and Little imported it from France. That's because there's not much support for families with XP in America, Sweet said. Only about 250 Americans suffer from it.

Educating the public about Xeroderma Pigmentosum is one goal for a dinner-dance fundraiser Sweet's



Emma Little, 9, with her mom, Johanna Sweet, an associate professor at Roanoke College. The little girl suffers from Xeroderma Pigmentosum, a rare genetic condition that affects fewer than one in 1 million people.

COURTESY OF JOHANNA SWEET

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Asylum

From A1

could soon expect to be sent to the battlefield to treat wounded Russian soldiers. They feared for their lives for other reasons as well. Irina, especially, feared living in a country that seemed to despise Ukrainians like her. Damir is Tatar, an ethnic minority with Turkish roots, whose young men were among the first Russian citizens to be conscripted into the military to be used as cannon fodder on the front line.

Their odyssey to the United States took them to the southern border with Mexico, where they first sought asylum. Eventually, they made it to Virginia and later Roanoke, where they settled earlier this year.

Now, they sat inside a silent immigration courtroom in Sterling. The three stood as the judge entered the room.

Would Damir and Irina be allowed to continue the lives they began to rebuild in Roanoke, or would they and their son and Damir's brother be sent back to a country where they faced the likelihood of persecution and possible death?

Surge of Russians

Damir, Irina and their family are part of more than 58,000 Russians who have filed new cases in U.S. immigration courts since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data research center at Syracuse University.

The increase is substantial when compared to the number of asylum-seekers over the past 20 years, which ranged from a low of 630 to just over 2,000. Russia's military draft and crackdown on opponents of the invasion account for the spike in Russians seeking asylum during the past year and a half.

"It's a huge increase since the beginning of the Russian invasion," said Jason West, an immigration lawyer with Just Law International in Northern Virginia, who worked on the Kantimerov family's case. "It's astronomical."

West explains that the numbers don't mean all cases are for asylum seekers, but he suspects the vast majority are asylum cases.

In fiscal year 2023, 280 new Russian immigration court cases were filed in Virginia, with 24 cases being granted and 15 cases denied.

Damir and Irina filed their petition in Virginia soon after arriving.

When Putin instituted a military draft on September 21, 2022, Damir knew his family needed to act fast to get out of the country, because people in the medical field are required to serve in time of war in Russia to treat the injured.

Tatars like Damir, who grew up in a small village before moving to Moscow, would be among the first to be sent to the front lines of war with minimal training. Tatars face intense discrimination, he said.

"Being Tatar, do you understand in what position we are in Russia?" Damir said during a recent interview in Roanoke. "You need to think of racial discrimination in this country in '60s"

Because Russia toughened anti-free speech laws following the invasion, it's illegal to speak out against the war. Damir and Irina feared that neighbors would call the police if they overheard the couple's conversations about their opposition to the war.

Damir said one neighbor was arrested shortly after speaking on his porch about his opposition to the war. The threat of jail and torture makes many Russians fear the repercussions of speaking about opposition to the invasion.

"It is a spiral of silence," Damir said.

Instead of talking about their escape plan while in their apartment, Damir and Irina sent messages to each other's phones across their kitchen table using Signal, an encrypted messaging service. Sometimes they spoke in low whispers to ensure nobody in the apartment complex would hear.

One day, after Russian military officers in charge of the draft knocked on their door, the family hid inside their apartment, afraid to answer the door or venture outside for hours after the officers were gone.

During his asylum hearing in Northern Virginia last month, Damir laid out his worries.

"Considering my political views and ethnicity, I would be



HEATHER ROUSSEAU PHOTOS, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Damir Kantimerov plays with his 2-year-old son, Daniial, during a family outing at Fishburn Park in Roanoke on Sept. 11. With the threat of deportation looming over their heads, Damir and his family tried their best at making a life for themselves in Roanoke after they arrived last spring.



Irina Kantimerov reads a literary piece she compiled from various Ukrainian poets during an Aug. 24 event celebrating 32 years of Ukrainian independence from the former Soviet Union. Her son, Daniial, 2, is at her side with a Mickey Mouse baseball cap.



Damir, back left, Irina Kantimerov and their son, Daniial, hang out by the creek at Fishburn Park in Roanoke on Sept. 11. The family fled Russia in September 2022 after fearing for their safety for speaking out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The two doctors, who cannot use their Russian medical licenses in the U.S., moved to Roanoke partly because they had hopes to get jobs in the medical field as researchers at one of the medical research centers.

assaulted, tortured, raped and maybe killed," Damir told Immigration Judge John Gillies, with the help of a Russian translator. Damir speaks English well but opted to speak in his native Russian during the hearing in order to say precisely what he meant.

Damir and Irina built a life for themselves in Russia, but never felt Russian. Damir's ethnic group had been persecuted for hundreds of years, their culture squashed by Russian forces, who wanted to assimilate the Tatar culture, enforcing Russian culture, language and beliefs.

"I say Tatar by birth, Russian by force," Damir said during an interview in Roanoke.

Irina could say the same. Russia's aggression brought her from Ukraine to Moscow in 2016, two years after armed Russian-backed separatists attacked the Ukrainian government in the Donbas region, including her hometown of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine.

"For me, the war started in 2014," Irina said.

Irina said the invasion started when she was in her fifth year of medical school at Donetsk National Medical University. She fled to Kharkiv, Ukraine, about a five hour drive away, to escape the fighting and complete her medical degree at Kharkiv Medical University. But Irina ran out of money and returned to Donetsk to find that her city had been seized by Russian forces. She said Russian secret police spied on the citizens and she was surrounded by bombing and missile attacks. In 2016 Irina decided to go to her family who had been taking refuge in the Russian capital, where her brother had been living before the war broke out. In Moscow she completed her residency program.

"I was devastated," she said of the move. "I didn't understand how I can live here" in Russia.

Damir and Irina met a few years later while working at Moscow Clinical City Hospital 52, where Damir, now 36, worked as a urologist, and Irina, now 31, was an anesthesiologist.

They were living just outside of Moscow and their son, Daniial had just been born when Putin ordered the invasion in 2022.

Damir and Irina felt alone in their opposition to Putin's invasion.

After a work meeting one morning while Damir was drinking coffee with fellow doctors, the topic of the war came up. "They said, 'Let those Ukrainians be killed,'" Damir said.

"I said, 'Guys, you have children, so you don't even mind that there will be children killed or women killed? Just imagine that you are with your family in a bomb shelter that there is missiles going there. You are doctors. Shame on you.'"

A colleague called him a traitor. Damir cried during his testimony when he recalled that the co-worker threatened Irina and his son. Damir, who was recovering from shoulder surgery at the time, said he could not defend himself.

"He used bombastic threatening language, he said he would rip my shoulder off and go after my wife and child," Damir testified.

The co-worker hit Damir in his left knee with a large ceramic statue of an owl. His knee was lacerated and swollen and he was out of work for three days because he could not walk well from the injury. When he returned, he said that the co-worker who injured him had been promoted.

Damir thinks Russians support the invasion of Ukraine because they are reliant on their government for their basic needs and believe what the government tells them.

"It's their oppression, it's the obsession. They want Russia to conquer all our world. Like in Nazi Germany, it's still the same. It's a different mindset. Here in this country [in the United States], you are responsible for your own life. You don't need to wait until government give you something or you don't need to wait until somebody will give you money."

Damir Kantimerov

"It's their oppression, it's the obsession," Damir said. "They want Russia to conquer all our world. Like in Nazi Germany, it's still the same."

He added: "It's a different mindset. Here in this country [in the United States], you are responsible for your own life. You don't need to wait until government give you something or you don't need to wait until somebody will give you money."

Russians, on the other hand, "don't do anything by themselves," he said. "That is why they believe the government. They're like children in the body of an elder."

Irina had trouble at work as well. She was on maternity leave with Daniial when the war broke out. When she returned to work at the hospital as an anesthesiologist, she was shocked to hear colleagues openly saying that all Ukrainians must die.

"Before my maternity, I had a lot of friends at my job," Irina said. "When I returned to my job in August 2022 I could hear, 'Oh, we want all people from Ukraine to be killed.'"

The couple had been wanting to move before the invasion, but now for their safety they had to act fast.

On September 27, 2022, Damir, Irina, their son and Damir's brother took a flight to Turkey.

Finding another way in

When they arrived in Turkey in late September 2022, Damir, Irina, their son and Damir's brother Daian checked into their vacation hotel and began searching for a place to settle.

They had 90 days before their visa expired. Damir and Irina shared details of the quest to seek asylum. "Every next step was like, will it work or no? Our future was unpredictable," Damir said.

Finding work in Turkey proved difficult, partly because the couple did not speak Turkish, and also because they did not feel welcome in Turkey, which had seen an influx in Russian arrivals since the outbreak of war.

The group set their eyes on the United States, where Damir had connections with American hospitals and universities. The urology department at the Wake Forest Baptist Hospital Network in Winston-Salem partnered with the hospital Damir and Irina worked at in Moscow. It also helped that Damir and Irina spoke English and Damir's cousin lived in Northern Virginia.

They applied for a student visa, but were rejected after being in-

terviewed by the U.S. State Department.

Ann Buwalda, founder of Just Law International and the initial attorney to work with the Kantimerovs at the law firm, said first trying to apply for a visa was the right way to go about coming to the United States.

"The Kantimerovs tried to do things the right way, by getting visas," Buwalda said. "It's unfortunate they were denied. I'm certain that it is because the State Department assumed they were going to apply for asylum."

Ultimately, they concluded their best option would be to request asylum at the U.S. southern border in Mexico.

"It was a rather hard and difficult decision," Damir said. "You are with a baby, you have no home, and you are in an alien country."

On Nov. 8, 2022, they began a series of flights that would last two days and take them through five countries — from South Africa to Qatar to Brazil, Columbia, and Mexico, where they would request asylum at the U.S. border.

They were afraid in Mexico, of gang violence and for the safety of their son.

Each step of the way required strategic thinking and improvising. In Mexico, they made connections to legally purchase a 2001 Chrysler Town and Country minivan, with an American license plate, which allowed them to avoid being stopped by Mexican border agents, whom they feared would arrest them.

Driving from Tijuana, Damir hid on the floor while his brother drove the minivan until they were certain they had made it to the U.S. border. They were concerned about drawing attention to themselves, thinking an additional man in the car might look suspicious.

When they arrived at the border, Damir sat up to see what was going on as they idled in line, this alerted U.S. officials to his presence in the vehicle.

"They beat the mirrors [with flashlights] and said, 'Who are you, what do you want?'" Damir recalled.

Damir gave the response he had practiced numerous times.

"I need political asylum," he said.

Damir and Daian were handcuffed and the four, including Irina and Daniial were taken into U.S. custody. Damir, relieved that they had reached their destination, began to cry.

"They cuffed us and I was crying," he said. "One of the officers asked, 'Why are you crying?'" Damir explained to the border control officer that the travelers had been through a lot.

"Don't worry," the border agent said. "You are safe."

But their journey was not over. Damir, Irina and Damir's younger brother, Daian were searched and taken to a detention center in California.

Because they were in custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents, the asylum seekers from Russia were placed in the court system.

Their immigration lawyer, Jason West, explained there are multiple ways to request asylum.

"In this case, CBP, who they encountered at the border, put them into removal proceedings, into the immigration court," West said. "So they weren't able to go directly to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and apply for asylum. They had to go to the immigration court, which is under the Department of Justice."

Damir, Irina and Daian were separated and questioned while detained, but they were provided with basic necessities. Irina was able to stay with Daniial, her and Damir's son.

"They were double checking if we were spies, but it is OK, we were fine with it because safety of this country is their business," Damir said.

Two days later, the family was placed in removal proceedings, a parole-like period which could have resulted in their deportation. Daian was held by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which investigated his claims more thoroughly. West explained that it is common for a single male to be scrutinized more by border agents.

Alex Filatov, Damir's cousin in Northern Virginia, and his friend, Frank Heston, drove across the country to pick Damir, Irina, and Daniial from California and take them to Virginia. As the group drove east across the U.S., Irina

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took pictures at every state border sign. One of her selfies showed the group standing along an interstate in front of a large green sign fixed to an overpass. The sign, which was emblazoned with the state flag's lone star, read, "Welcome to Texas, DRIVE FRIENDLY- THE TEXAS WAY."

After arriving in Virginia, Damir, Irina and Daniil stayed in Manassas, for the next six months.

Daian was released from ICE agents on Dec. 25.

"On Christmas, like a present, he was home," Damir said of his brother.

Starting over in Roanoke

With the threat of deportation looming over their heads, Damir and Irina tried their best at making a life for themselves in Roanoke after they arrived last spring.

In Manassas the family stayed with Damir's cousin who came to the U.S. almost 30 years ago as a foreign exchange student and then got married and became a U.S. citizen. For six months, Damir and his family checked in with ICE, initially once a week and eventually less frequently, using an app through ICE on their phone. They were required to stay in Virginia until they were released of their supervision, in June.

The couple and Damir's brother looked for a permanent place to settle and get jobs. Their scouting mission brought them from Northern Virginia to Roanoke.

Watching the sun come up over the mountains from a Hotel Roanoke window in April persuaded Irina. "We said, 'Oh, we like this city, we try to stay here,'" Irina said.

Damir said the Blue Ridge Mountains remind him of his hometown in the Ural Mountains in Bashkiria region of southeastern Russia. "There are old mountains, same as the Appalachian," Damir said.

They said they are thankful for the kindness from people in the Roanoke Valley, including the landlord who rented them an apartment without a credit history or a job and the barber who gave them free haircuts and a gym that made Damir feel at home. It was not long before they made friends and became active in Roanoke's small but vibrant Ukrainian community.

Under the arch of a rainbow and weight of humidity after a late-August thunderstorm. Damir and Irina attended an event celebrating 32 years of Ukrainian independence from the former Soviet Union.

They gathered among a group of more than 30 people holding American and Ukrainian flags in Freedom Plaza in downtown Roanoke. Irina spoke during the event, standing between two displays depicting portraits of Roanokers with the text, "THANK YOU" at each picture. Ukrainians of the Roanoke Valley wanted to thank Roanokers for their support of the Ukrainian community since Russia invaded Ukraine, and said showing support from the U.S. helps the spirits of those fighting the war overseas.

Irina took her son's hand, a Mickey Mouse baseball cap, with two mouse-like ears sticking up atop his head, and she introduced a literary piece she compiled from various



HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Reagan Valeyev, from back left, Anna Miroshnychenko, and Irina Kantimerov talk while their children look at books during a gathering for the Kantimerov family hosted by Valeyev and her husband, Ed, in their Roanoke home on October 8. "We love Roanoke so much and now it's our home," Irina said. "Because so kind people."



PHOTO COURTESY OF IRINA KANTIMEROV

Irina Kantimerov took pictures at every state border sign during the drive from California to Virginia after being released from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). At far back is her husband, Damir Kantimerov holding their son, Daniil, and at center is Damir's cousin, Alex Filatov, who helped them get settled in the U.S.

Ukrainian poets.

"This poem is about the catastrophe of the human soul," Irina said. "The great people of the great Ukrainian, about strong and independent people, about the hope for the peace and the hope for the healing of the soul."

She began to read in Ukrainian.

According to the Virginia Department of Social Services, since Russia's invasion in 2022, about 50 people have come to the Roanoke and New River valleys under the Biden administration's Uniting for Ukraine program. There have been about 4,900 people statewide who came through the program, which is a pathway for Ukrainians fleeing the war to come to the United States.

Though Irina and Damir were forced to come a different way, by seeking asylum at the U.S. southern border with Mexico, their family quickly made friends and felt welcomed.

Roanoke became a place they

could call home.

"We love Roanoke so much and now it's our home" Irina said, "Because so kind people ... and there's a very good atmosphere," Irina said.

Reagan and Ed Valeyev are some of those friends they made. Reagan is American and Ed is a Russian-born U.S. citizen, who, like Damir, is the ethnic minority of Tatar. They both have family in Russia who they do not know when they can see again, because of the war and their stance on the war.

Reagan and Ed were glad to meet another Russian in Roanoke. They are not aware of any other Russian citizens who have recently come to the valley.

"It's been nice to add people who are from Russia to our small group," Reagan said about the Ukrainian, Russian and American companions. It was nice to see that there are other like minded people from Russia, who oppose the war."

Ed points out that just be-

cause you come from Russia it does not mean you are a bad person.

"No matter where people are from they can be bad or they can be good. I think we see the world in similar ways," Ed said about him and Damir both being Tatar.

One summer afternoon Damir and Irina picked Daniil up from child care at Jewish Community Preschool in Roanoke and took him to the nearby Fishburn Park. Damir and Irina spoke about their job search.

Damir said he sent his resume to multiple contacts with Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC but had yet to hear a response.

To do their medical practices in the U.S., Damir and Irina would basically have to start over. They would have to pass the United States Medical Licensing Examination and do their residency programs over again, the entire process can take five to seven years to complete, almost as long as it took them to complete their medical degrees and do their residency programs in Russia.

Their savings from selling their apartment in Russia was allowing them to hold out on getting an entry level job which would not use their medical skill sets.

"Nowadays, we can go to work [at] Walmart, McDonald's," Damir said. "Like things that you need to do if you're running out of money."

A judge rules

On that September day in a Northern Virginia courtroom, Damir, Irina and Daian stood to hear their fate.

"I find the testimony of Damir Kantimerov to be credible," Judge John Gillies said.

"I will grant their asylum."

West said he submitted close to 800 pages of evidence on the behalf of Damir and his family, proving if they went back to Russia they would be in danger of persecution and because they opposed Russia's war on Ukraine they would be sent to jail and, or tortured.

"Draft evasion by itself is not grounds for asylum," West said. "That's the whole idea of prosecution versus persecution. If they're (the Russian government) prosecuting you for violating a law, that doesn't mean that you're going to get asylum. It's the underlying aspect here,

the reason they were opposing the military draft ... and what would occur to them if they went back, that makes a difference."

The trio's eyes filled with tears, and they all took turns hugging, including their immigration lawyer, Jason West.

Damir asked permission to address the judge.

"I would like to say we are so grateful for the people of the United States," he said. "We've met so many incredible people ... thank you so much."

"You're welcome," the judge replied.

"Today shows how institutions can function properly."

Outside the courthouse, the trio sat around a table with West to discuss the case.

"Things went very smoothly," West said.

Exactly one year had gone by since they fled Russia. The situation was daunting and exciting.

West said that the family is no longer asylum seekers. Now, with asylum granted, they can move forward to seek more permanent residence in the U.S.

West also said that it is rare that an immigration proceeding gets a verdict as quickly as this one did. It helped that the Department of Homeland Security attorney did not oppose granting asylum.

The first people Irina shared the good news with were friends they made in Roanoke, including Reagan and Ed Valeyev.

EPILOGUE

Less than two weeks after being granted asylum, Damir received a job offer as a research fellow with Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He had no luck finding medical related jobs in Roanoke, so he sought work elsewhere.

Damir is thankful for an opportunity to start fresh and for all the friends he and his family has made in Roanoke.

"My second life started in the USA," Damir said. I call the city of Roanoke my second birthplace. It took a huge room in my heart."

Daniil ran around the south Roanoke home of Reagan and Ed with other kids. Reagan and Ed Valeyev hosted a combination going away gathering and asylum celebration for Damir, Irina, Daniil and Daian.

Damir brought a traditional Tatar dish he prepared called chebureki, fried dough stuffed with meat and onions.

Damir and Irina are anxious about starting over with their careers and lives, but they acknowledge they feel hopeful and empowered thanks to friends they made in Roanoke, immigration lawyers such as Jason West and their family who helped them along the way.

"All people have got a right for liberty, and for pursuit of happiness," Damir said, quoting from the Declaration of Independence. "So for me, it is the most inspirational words. So like, nobody will kill you or suppress you. ... Now we are in a pursuit of happiness."

Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2022-23 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.

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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Damir and Irina Kantimerov, from left, Damir's younger brother Daian, and their immigration lawyer, Jason West with Just Law International, depart immigration court in Sterling, Virginia, after their asylum hearing on Sept. 27, exactly one year after fleeing Russia.



HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Reagan Valeyev, left, and Irina Kantimerov share a moment during a gathering to celebrate the Kantimerovs being granted asylum in the U.S. Reagan and her husband, Ed, are some of the first people Irina messaged after their immigration hearing in Northern Virginia.