



The Brossier family boat in Grise Fiord, Nunavut.

THE FRENCH ABROAD



COURTESY OF ERIC BROSSIER

Eric Brossier and his family, from France, are spending their second winter on a yacht in Grise Fiord, Nunavut.

Russia grants citizenship to actor leaving France over proposed tax hike on rich

‘We can expect a massive migration’

By **JIM HEINTZ**
in Moscow
AND **LORI HINNANT**
in Paris

The Kremlin has cast Gérard Depardieu in one of the most surprising roles of his life — as a new Russian citizen. Thursday’s announcement President Vladimir Putin has approved his application for citizenship is almost a real-life analogue to the French actor’s 1990 comedy *Green Card*, in which his character contracts a sham marriage to work in the United States.

But in this version, taxes appear to be at the heart of the matter. Mr. Depardieu, 64, has waged a battle against a proposed super tax on millionaires in his native country.

François Hollande, the French president, plans to raise the tax on earned income of more than €1-million (\$1.3-million) to 75%, from 41%. Russia has a flat 13% tax rate.

In a letter published in the newspaper *Le Parisien*, the actor confirmed he had applied for a passport and was thrilled he had been accepted.

“I love Russia, its people, its history, its writers. I enjoy making films there, where I perform with actors like Vladimir Mashkov,” he wrote.

“My father was a communist in his time and listened to Moscow Radio. That is also my culture.”

He added he had spoken to Mr. Hollande about his decision.

The move is clearly an image buffer for Russia, calling attention to the country’s attractive tax regime and boosting Mr. Putin’s efforts to show the economic chaos of the early post-Soviet period has passed.

“The distinctiveness of our tax system is poorly known about in the West. When they know about it, we can expect a massive migration of rich

Europeans to Russia,” Dmitry Rogozin, the deputy prime minister, bragged on Twitter.

Others aren’t so sure. Political analyst Pavel Svyatenkov told the state news agency RIA Novosti the move was “very good, very high-quality PR for Russia,” but he was didn’t think it would trigger a flood of new residents.

“I don’t expect a massive movement of rich people to here, for the reason that Russia remains a pretty poor country by Western measurements and here there are bigger problems with crime and corruption,” he said.

As Mr. Depardieu’s criticism

He added he would surrender his passport and French social security card. In October, the mayor of Nérchin, a small Belgian border town, said Mr. Depardieu had bought a house and set up legal residence there, a move that was slammed by Mr. Hollande’s Socialist government.

Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, the French government spokeswoman, did not comment directly on Mr. Depardieu’s tax fight. But she drew a clear distinction between people who have personal or professional reasons to live abroad and “French citizens who proclaim loudly and clearly that they

they’re exiling themselves for

to play the lead in the film *Rasputin*, which also starred Mr. Maskhov as Czar Nicolas II.

He is well known in the country, where he appears in an ad for Sovietsky Bank’s credit card and is prominently featured on the bank’s home page.

“You have to understand that Depardieu is a star in Russia,” Vladimir Fedorovski, a Russian writer living in France, told the Europe 1 network.

“There are crowds around Depardieu. He’s a symbol of France. He’s a huge ambassador of French culture.”

The actor has made more than 150 films and was nominated for an Oscar for his performance as Cyrano de Bergerac in the 1990 film.

The Kremlin statement gave no information on why Mr. Putin made the citizenship grant, but the Russian president had expressed sympathy with the actor in December, days after Mr. Depardieu said he was considering Russian citizenship.

“As we say, artists are easily offended and therefore I understand the feelings of Mr. Depardieu,” Mr. Putin said.

Although France’s highest court struck down the new tax Dec. 29, the government has promised to resubmit the law in a slightly different form. On Wednesday, it estimated the court decision would cost the country \$275-million in 2013.

France’s debt burden is about 90% of national income, not far off levels that have caused problems elsewhere in the 17-country euro-zone.

Mr. Depardieu is not the only high-profile Frenchman to object to the super tax. Bernard Arnault, chief of the luxury goods and fashion giant LVMH and worth about \$41-billion, has said he would leave for Belgium.

The Associated Press

Russia remains a pretty poor country by Western measurements

of the proposed tax roiled his country, Jean-Marc Ayrault, the French prime minister, called him “pathetic.”

The actor responded angrily in an open letter.

“I have never killed anyone, I don’t think I’ve been unworthy, I’ve paid [\$190-million] in taxes over 45 years,” he wrote. “I will neither complain nor brag, but I refuse to be called ‘pathetic.’”



ALEXEI NIKOLSKY / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Actor Gérard Depardieu, left, speaking with Russian President, then Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin in 2010.

A cozy nook in the place that never thaws



O’CONNOR

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The Brossiers gave up a potential life in Brittany full of baguettes and brie, of fresh peaches and strawberries, of fine French wines and refined French culture and conversation for a life of ice and snow and 24-hour darkness and oh-my-bejeebers-it’s-minus-50-degrees-outside cold and my closest neighbours are serving raw seal meat for New Year’s Eve dinner.

If you are thinking, as I was, that these French people are nuts, you might change your mind — though not your mailing address — after speaking to Eric Brossier.

“There was never a kick-off moment when I decided upon this lifestyle,” he says.

“I think it is just something that came to me, little by little. When I was a teenager I was always planning small expeditions, kayaking or mountain biking.

“I knew as I got older that I didn’t want to be a scientist that was stuck in a lab or in an office.”

So now he is stuck in the ice aboard the Vagabond. Marooned on a boat and spending his second winter, by choice — after five frigid Brossier winter sojourns in the Norwegian Arctic — in Grise Fiord, Nunavut, better known among the Inuit as Aujuittuq.

Or: the “place that never thaws.”

On Thursday it was minus-30 in the place that never thaws which, in winter, is also the place where the sun never shines, save for a subtle lightening of the sky around noon, hinting at daylight’s return, still months away.

“When the moon is out you can really enjoy seeing the mountains around the village,” Mr. Brossier says. “But this is a beautiful place. We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t want to be.”

The Vagabond is designed for the Arctic ice, with her reinforced steel hull. It is a cozy, ocean-going nook where two parents, who met many years back on another research trip, are raising five-year-old Leonie and three-year-old Aurore, named, naturally, after the aurora borealis — our dancing Northern Lights.

Anybody with kids, especially young kids, is acutely acquainted with cabin fever, that sensation of being trapped, inside, on a bitterly cold winter’s day and scrambling to find sources of entertainment to occupy the little darlings.

But finding things to do doesn’t seem to be a problem in a place that it is always bitterly cold. With some imagination, says Mr. Brossier, and enough layers of clothing, anything is possible.

“If you just have to go to a store to buy some games or you watch TV or you get stuck in front of a computer screen at some point you are not inventing your own life anymore,” says the scientist, currently gathering data on polar ice thickness and glacier patterns for Christiaan Haas, a professor at York University.

“But if its just you and your kids — and the ice and snow — and maybe a shovel, and you make, I don’t know, a swing [off the mast of the boat], the games you can invent are endless, as endless as your imagination.

“Everything is possible here.”

Snow swings. Ice sculptures. Igloos and forts and tunnels and snow races and joy riding in sea kayaks dragged by sled dogs. Anything. Eating raw seal meat at an Inuit New Year’s feast. Learning traditional games and dances. Making friends with your curious, welcoming neighbours. Anything.

But there are drawbacks to life in the ice. The Vagabond was almost crushed a few years back. The Brossiers also got stuck on an ice floe while out for a family picnic.

“We had to call in a helicopter to rescue us,” Mr. Brossier says. “We haven’t had any scary stories from Canada yet.”

The family owns a house, on dry land, in Brest, France, a port city on the Atlantic coast. They rent it out for much of the year, and when they do return home, for a two- or three-month stint, to catch up with friends and family, they find themselves thinking of their other life in the Canadian darkness. Where the moon lights the snow and the Arctic mountains loom, silent and near.

“Maybe we do miss being in France when we are here, just a little bit,” Mr. Brossier says, chuckling. “But when you know how to live without something, and then you have it again, it is such happiness, and for me that means having a meal outside in a T-shirt with friends and family — and good cheese and wine and good bread.

“This is something we can’t think about here. Even in summer, you can’t stay outside too long without a good fleece. You don’t find wine or cheese, or fruit, like fresh strawberries or peaches from the tree, but these are all things we will enjoy back in France. And we know that. It’s not a problem to live without these things. We made the choice to be here. It is not hard.

“It is the life we choose.”

National Post

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A HOME IN THE ARCTIC

French researcher Eric Brossier, his wife and two young children are spending the winter trapped in the Arctic sea ice aboard a 15-metre polar yacht.



RICHARD JOHNSON / NATIONAL POST