

Russia's Middle Class Looks to Emigrate

Some Russians are increasingly interested in leaving the country and settling elsewhere. Most affected are the sons and daughters of the new Russian middle class who have gradually become Europeanized and and see little future under the new feudalism represented by Vladimir Putin and his regime. Though finding better salaries and working conditions in democratic European states is the principle aim, the move also represents personal emancipation. According to statistics, those seeking to emigrate aren't so much politically disenchanted as resigned that Russia won't change in the coming years.

by *Lev Gudkov*

Students work in a building of St. Petersburg University's law faculty.

In recent months the theme of emigration has produced considerable debate in Russia. The topic became a hot button issue after the Nobel Prize was awarded to physicists Konstantin Novoselov and Andrei Gejm, émigrés forced from the country under communism. They now work in research centers in Britain and Holland. The scientists curtly turned down offers to return home.

Demographers that slight more than a million people left post-Soviet Russia in its first decade of existence, while the second decade saw the departure of 1.3 million.

Domestic journalists and politicians have focused on the post-Communist brain drain, particularly in terms of young scientists and engineers, well-trained and educated Russians who've found themselves living in chronic poverty. Experts and Kremlin ideologues worry that the drain undermines not only the country's potential but also poses a threat to national security.

Liberals take another view, insisting that it's the country's defects that are causing its best and brightest to leave. They cite an unfavorable business climate, endemic corruption, the absence of an independent judiciary, media censorship, lack of respect for private property, and pressure exerted by the Putin racket on entrepreneurs.

They're both right, but their views reflect different periods of recent Russian



AFP / Getty Images / K. Kudriavtsev

history. Immigration for economic reasons peaked in the late 1990s and all but ended by 2007-2008. But the desire among middle class residents to pick up and leave became perceptible only in 2009, and has strengthened since then. For Russian migration officials, “migrants” those who in visa application for travel abroad specifically request the renouncing Russian citizenship “to transfer to another country,” or those who don’t return to Russia after a year of living abroad. Demographers are forced to evaluate the extent of migration based mainly on foreign data regarding the number of immigrants from Russia. In its recent history, Russia has experienced several dramatic waves of emigration.

The first, which lasted between 1918-1925, emerged after the Russian Revolution, civil war, the “Red Terror” and the defeat of White Russian Movement, and involved between 2.5 and three million people. It saw the flight of Russia’s most educated and cultured citizenry, including tsarist officers, noblemen, merchants, intellectuals, and even some soldiers. The second wave, in the 1940s, was produced by World War II and consisted mostly of refugees, prisoners of war, or civilians who were forcibly deported to Germany. The third followed the failure of Communist reform, which in turn opened the door to the ouster of Nikita Khrushchev, the crushing of the Prague Spring, the repression of dissidents, and the introduction of a long period of stagnation marked by the Leonid Brezhnev years.

Illegal emigration (or failure to return from work assignments abroad) was considered high treason and punished cruelly. Only in the mid-1970s, coinciding with the detente policy, did Moscow allow some ethnic groups, Jews in particular, to leave the country officials. But the process was fraught with prohibitions, restrictions and the confiscation of goods. Only small portions of those citizens who actually wanted to leave the Soviet Union were allowed out.

The seeming ethnic character of this migration flow concealed an important detail: Jews weren’t particularly

ready to leave the country. Not only were they among the most “Russified” ethnic communities, they were also among the most urbane, with the highest educational levels and the greatest range of professional skills. Their social capital and cultural resources, as well as ethnic cohesion, heightened in the 1960s as a result of state-sponsored anti-Semitism, as well as the Holocaust stigma and an early involvement in the struggle for civil rights, worked together to stimulate the Jewish exodus.

Many ethnic groups sought to leave the Soviet Union, but only Jews were able to win agreements from foreign states welcoming their immigration and resulting Russian authorization of their decision to expatriate (obtained as a result of international public opinion). The more educated a Soviet citizen, the higher the likelihood that he or she would consider leaving the country. Emigration was a way of expressing rejection of the Soviet way of life.

The Levada Center’s population migration trend studies were conducted between 1989 and 1999. They outlined the nature of the social environment some sought to leave behind. According to these early studies, the Russians most determined to emigrate had been active advocates of social democratization and vehement critics of the Communist regime in the perestroika period. The younger and more educated the people, the greater their desire to find a new home.

During the 1990s, leaving the country was no longer restricted, changing the nature of the flux. Departure was no longer motivated by political repression, discrimination, social strife or life-threatening home front situations (excluding instability in Caucasus and refugees from Chechnya). Russians turned to emigration mostly for economic reasons. These motivations would dominate until 2008-2009.

Only in the last few years has emigration again changed its character.

The current surge in the desire to leave the country is not unique [SEE TABLE 1]. A similar pattern was detected during the country’s last period of acute social crisis, in 1998-

TABLE 1

Would you like to live abroad or in a state outside of the former Soviet Union? (in % based on interview subjects, N=1600)										
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1999	2009	2010	2011
Yes	11	18	13	15	11	12	21	13	13	22
No	69	69	77	72	78	77	63	80	80	73
Don't	20	13	10	14	11	11	16	7	7	5

TABLE 2

Would you like to live abroad or in a state outside of the former Soviet Union? (May 2011, based on a sampling of the Russian population, N=1600, in % of interview subjects)			
	Absolutely yes / Probably yes	Probably no / Absolutely not	Don't know
Businessman	53	42	5
Manager	12	83	5
Working professional	33	61	6
Military	23	77	0
Office worker	30	52	18
Factory worker	18	76	6
Student	52	45	3
Retired	3	96	1
Housewife	23	76	1
Unemployed	31	65	4

1999, when 21 percent of respondents declared their willingness to leave. But as early as July 2000, after Vladimir Putin rose to the presidency and expectations of liberal reforms were revived, the potential emigrants fell to between five and six percent. In the fall of 2008, corresponding to the global downturn, the number rose again to 16 percent, and has risen regularly since then. Today, a full 22 percent of the adult Russian population says it wants to leave the country.

Currently, the desire to migrate is especially prevalent among three categories: entrepreneurs, professionals with higher education, and the unemployed. Among youth, the desire to go abroad to study or worked for a limited time has always been higher than that of other population groups, while the desire of youth to emigrate permanently has been about equal (and sometimes even lower) than the average population.

Among the youth interviewed, 59 percent said they were interested in traveling west “for some time, to work,” more or less the same percentage (48 percent) that said it wanted to do the same “to study.” But only 28 percent of the youth group said they were inclined to leave the country.

However, only 0.5 percent of the population has made any concrete plans to leave, with another two percent saying it has “seriously considered” exiting. Another four-to-five percent admits to gathering information about the country where they’d like to go, or studied its language, without seriously considering migration as a real solu-

tion to day-to-day problems. Of course, 0.5 percent of Russia’s adult working population amounts to huge mass of people, which works out to tens of thousands of emigrants annually, if not more. The cumulative effect of such this kind of annual departure flow results in a lowering of moral and intellectual potential of society. These departures have seen large European cities including Berlin and London build up powerful Russian communities that now number between 250,000 and 300,000 people, not to mention the Russian Diaspora present in Israel, the United States, Canada and Australia.

In the years immediately before the collapse of the Soviet system and immediately following the breakup of the USSR, Russian emigration had an almost exclusively ethnic feel. Jews left in droves, and to a lesser extent Germans.

But by 2009, experts noted that both ethnic migration and the “brain drain” exodus had virtually ceased, either because it had run its course or because state funding to scientific disciplines had improved slightly in recent years. Unexpectedly, however, a new desire to emigrate came from those who had benefited from the changes over the last two decades. This population group can be conventionally defined as the emerging middle class. The desire to leave Russia among middle class youth is becoming very noticeable.

Recent Levada Center studies provide greater insight into this young, affluent, middle class group [SEE TABLE 4]. In most cases, middle class is defined by those with an average monthly income of not less than €2,000 in Moscow

TABLE 3

Would you like to move to a foreign country? (May 2011, N=1001, in % of interview subjects; 100% for each category)			
	Absolutely yes / Probably yes	Probably no / Absolutely not	Don't know
For work	46	37	31
To study	51	59	65
To live permanently	3	4	4

or between €1,000 and €1,500 in provincial cities with a population of one million inhabitants. More than 90 percent of them have at least a college degree, feel fully at home in their work, are pleased with their accomplishments, and look forward confidently to a secure future. About 20 percent work in public or state enterprises, three quarters are managers or employees of private companies, five percent are self-employed or freelancers, while 15 percent said they owned their own businesses.

About half of those who interested in working abroad (48 percent) would do so only under certain conditions, namely if they were offered employment commensurate with their qualifications, as well as a fairly high income. A smaller number (41 percent) say their only condition is a high salary. The smallest group (eight percent) says it would be willing to work abroad based on its immediate qualifications and regardless of salary (this applies mostly to scientists and highly qualified specialists). Most youthful respondents, not surprisingly, are determined to study abroad. Finally, about a third of respondents would leave Russia “forever,” or at least for an indefinite, unspecified time. Among them are young people with few family ties and Moscow residents, where the developed market makes mobility seem more appealing.

The countries of destination are familiar ones and limited mostly to Western democratic states, namely Germany (19 percent), United States (15 percent), Britain (13 percent), Italy or France (eight percent each), Canada (six percent), Switzerland (five percent), Spain (five) and Aus-

tralia four), Sweden, Finland and other European countries are ranked between two and three percent.

Different categories of respondents gave significantly different replies regarding their motivations for going abroad temporarily or permanently.

Those seeking to go abroad “to work” for an indefinite period were usually civil servants, about one in three (30 percent), as well as 43 percent state company employees, 47 percent of private companies employees, and 59 percent of freelancers.

As for study abroad, the breakdown was as follows: 25-30 percent of state employees, 39 percent among private employees, and 41 percent of the self-employed. Those who sought to migrate represented smaller numbers: 20-25 percent of state employees, 32 percent of private employees, and 41 percent of freelancers.

In most case, those wishing to go abroad (to work or to settle permanently) had already traveled extensively (65-70 percent), while those who with no interest in moving had not. The more people traveled abroad, the more they yearned to leave Russia. This relationship wasn't present among those eager to continue their education in foreign universities or colleges.

Of potential emigrants, 54 percent had already developed relationships and ties other countries, usually among residents and Russian arrivals that had found a way to adapt perfectly to their new lives. Compared to those who had no desire to leave Russia, this group had more relatives or friends abroad (51 percent to 31 percent). For the sake of comparison, 73 percent of those who had nev-

TABLE 4

Would you like to move to a foreign country?			
	Absolutely yes / Probably yes	Probably no / Absolutely not	Don't know
Business and company owner	32	66	
Company CEO	23	70	
Mid-level manager	33	64	
Working professional	31	65	
Housewife	40	58	



er thought of expatriation had no such connections or social resources, not surprising since most live in the Russian provinces with limited opportunities to come in contact with foreign nationals and cosmopolitan influences.

Almost half of those who wish to go abroad for indefinitely or for good possess a professional and education background higher than those who have no wish to do so. Those interested in migrating usually have a widespread knowledge of foreign languages: 52 percent say they speak fluent English and 62 percent say they read English fluently (among those with no interest in leaving, the indices 30 and 37 percent, respectively). Another 10 percent say they understand German, four percent French, and so on. These indices of knowledge of foreign languages are not remotely comparable to those of the Russian population as a whole.

The idea of leaving Russia arises among those who already possess the necessary basic information about travel and a circle of external relationships. Those who leave are not necessarily those who wish to but those who can, based on their skills in social interaction and the funds necessary to make the leap.

The increased desire to emigrate among the Russian middle class is not tied to a political or ideological clash with ruling Kremlin power structure of a response to po-

A 1972 New York City demonstration directed against the Soviet Union charging fees for Jews to leave the country.

litical opposition. Though the group has little faith in the ruling class, it is just as distrustful of the opposition.

What that means, in essence, is that these middle class citizens see no alternative to the existing regime, which makes conditions their views about the future of the country. In general, the young middle class can be said to express a moderately pessimistic viewpoint.

The majority of respondents (56 percent) believe that the political system that has arisen in Russia over the last decade is destined to last indefinitely and is unlikely to witness substantial changes in the near future. About a third of young people (32 percent), mostly residents of provincial cities, believe by contrast that the current situation is unstable and may change substantially in the coming years.

But both sides appear convinced that any potential instability is the direct result of the authoritarian tendencies of the governing regime, attributing whatever might go wrong in Russia to the ruling class's inability to solve social and economic problems.

These people are oriented towards a certain kind of

lifestyle and believe they've been successful based on their own efforts and intelligence alone, no thanks to the government. Unlike the bulk of Russia's population, they don't see the government as conferring assistance or handing them greater power. They have no expectations of social welfare and don't believe the government will improve their standard of living, get them a job, or obtain guarantee them living accommodation.

If successful, affluent young people are unhappy with the Russian status quo it's not for ideological or political differences with the regime, but because they clearly understand the impasse that exists in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Do worry less about domestic personal power struggles or infighting among parties and more about attaining a way of life modeled on Western examples that they see as unattainable in Russia given current conditions.

In analyzing the intentions and motivations behind migration it's vitally important to emphasize both the so-called "pull factors" (the attractiveness of the conditions or patterns of life in the countries targeted as a destination point) and the "repulsion factors" (threats to personal existence, fears, and loss of prospects). In Russia's case, the pull factors are more powerful than those governing repulsion [SEE TABLE 5].

Young people put two considerations first: a) a high quality of life for which you have to work hard and consistently, applying personal creativity, b) the existence of conditions (confidence in a future that can't arbitrarily deprive them of they've achieved). This global

notion of quality of life or the imaging of the outlines of a "successful life" includes legal protection, the inadmissibility of arbitrariness, honest and clear rules of business codes, access to quality medical care, an emphasis on ecology, a high standard of living for the elderly, an honest police system, and so on.

For these people, institutional conditions that recognize their efforts and their ideas of order, including the protection of what has been acquired or the preservation of accumulated assets, is essential. It's not a matter of desiring money for its own sake, or even placing value on personal assets and property, but more a kind of striving for the right context.

Such a context, if identified, can motivate Russians to change not only where they live but also give up on Russian citizenship entirely. Moreover, the gap between desire expressed by this group and reality of attaining it does nothing but grow.

But telling pollsters you want to leave Russia doesn't mean it'll ever happen. A large group, 60 percent, expressed extensive fantasy desires but had never once acted on their stated wish to leave. Only one in 10 had ever taken concrete steps to move abroad. Based on previous migration studies, it's fair to say the dreamers will never leave Russia, barring social catastrophe. But their desires are important for personal self-affirmation and to make a place in Russian life, one that represents an approach that breaks from conformist norms.

The spread the desire to emigrate is being caused by the state of general uncertainty that exists in Russia and that

TABLE 5

If you went abroad, what would be the motivating factors? (% based on those who replied saying they wished to leave Russia. Only top reasons given are mentioned in this chart)	
To ensure my children and better and more secure future	93
Better living conditions	92
To live in a freer state	86
To get better medical care and pensions	85
To make good on personal promise	80
To enjoy a cleaner environment	79
Because Russia doesn't assure its citizens just rewards for their efforts	78
Because Russia's authority structure is random and risky	76
Because of the way business is conducted	61
Because of political and economic instability	61
Because of crime, personal threats and terrorism	54
Because of the political system	52

TABLE 6

Have you already or are you in the midst of taking action to leave? (in % based on those who expressed a wish to leave the country)	
I'm not doing anything but I will	44
I'm getting information on where I want to go	25
I'm learning the language of my country of destination	18
I'm working with parents and friends to facilitate the move	7
I'm sending my CV around hoping for a job offer	6
I'm checking out where I want to live and work	3
I've delivered the necessary documents to the embassy but await the okay	2
I have applied to a number of foreign universities	2
None of the above	17



Israeli President Shimon Peres holds up a new stamp issued by the Israeli postal authority on the 20th anniversary of the start of immigration into Israel from the former Soviet Union in 2010. Immigrant Absorption Minister Sofa Landver stands beside him. Since the start of major immigration from Russia in 1990, Israel has integrated more than a million Russian arrivals.

with it the notion that "Putin stability" can endure indefinitely.

Russia's middle class is sensitive to the gap between the rhetoric of modernization and the reality of day-to-day life. It fears the possibility of arbitrary taxes increases, which risks driving business into a gray area of fraught with corrupt relationships and semi-criminal activity. It worries at the overall absence of a functioning justice system and the existence of prosecutors that can protect businessmen from the underworld.

There's an awareness of a chronic vulnerability, humiliation, dependence, lack of freedom, coupled with constant worry about an aggressive environment. This fear and bitterness can become cumulative over the years and risks exploding. In essence, we're dealing with fallout

from rejection. Those who matured in the Soviet era are rejecting the complex, new forms of social organization and human personality that have been developed in Russia over last two decades. But it's the first group that continues setting the tone for the country's daily lifestyle and how human beings are treated.

Modern European standards and rules of conduct are openly incompatible with the culture of violence that remains the norm in Russia, where power brutalizes and subservience is rewarded. The underlying issue isn't a simple power struggle but a deeper more generalized dilemma that sees a collision between individuals who have become nearly European, at least in their the values they embrace and the actions they take, and the rest of Russian society, which remains feudal.