The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The New Face of Emigration

By Simon Kuper

May 20, 2012



My grandfather was born in Manchester in 1912. His parents had only recently arrived from Lithuania, and they soon moved on. After losing two children to scarlet fever in filthy industrial Manchester, they left for much healthier Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

Thanks to my grandfather's birthplace, I was born British, though admittedly not very British. "Birth in the district of West Mengo in the Republic of Uganda," records my birth certificate. We soon moved on, too. I grew up everywhere, and my children were born in Paris. Now Britain is refusing them citizenship. It seems my grandfather's 15 minutes in Manchester weren't sufficient to confer Britishness on generations of descendants.

So when it comes to emigration, I'm biased. We Kupers are serial migrants. But it is objective fact that perhaps a third of young people in Western countries should emigrate tomorrow. Now that emigration has become a cinch, it's a no-brainer. Just go already.

Emigration used to be hard. When my great-grandparents sailed to Africa, they probably knew it was for life. A bad choice was hard to rectify. In Argentina 20 years ago, just after

South America's "lost decade," I encountered a nation of nostalgic immigrants who seemed to feel they'd got on the wrong boat. They should have gone to the United States instead.

Sometimes the wrong choice was personal rather than political. A friend of my grandmother's met a Czech refugee in wartime London. Postwar, she followed him to quiet, bourgeois Czechoslovakia. Then suddenly, communism arrived. When she finally made it back to London in the 1990s, I commiserated with her on her decades behind the Iron Curtain. "Oh, I didn't mind the regime," she said. "It was my husband I couldn't stand."

People have emigrated since the first humans walked out of Africa, but since the 1990s emigration has changed its nature. It's no longer forever. Nowadays, you get on a cheap flight, Skype your mother from the airport, and if you don't like the place, fly home again.

That's why emigration is the right option for tens of millions today. About a fifth of young people in Western countries are unemployed. In Spain and Greece, about half are. They could stick around at home, perhaps eventually find work and then spend their careers paying for the previous generation's pensions, health care and debt. Or they could emigrate. It is hard to make a start in Brazil, Canada or Germany, but the alternative might be watching television in your parents' house for the next four years. Similarly, elderly Americans drowning in health-care costs should consider hotfooting it to Britain or India pronto.

Emigration is probably the quickest way of improving your career prospects, both now and for your lifetime. You make a new set of contacts. You learn survival skills. You probably learn a new language. The anthropologist Susan Ossman, author of the forthcoming "Paths of Serial Migration," writes: "The experience of moving from place to place ... tends not only to build a person's bureaucratic acumen. It opens up new geographic, linguistic and political spaces for action as well as contemplation." Better still, it annoys xenophobes.

Even when emigration is a bad experience, it's a good experience. Perhaps you desert your car at the airport, but if you've made friends, then you can always trade with the country, move hither and back depending on the business cycle and one distant day send your kids to bunk at a friend's place across the water for free.

There's much speculation — often quite dark — about why Mormons and Jews tend to succeed in business. It might simply be because they emigrate. Jews typically cross borders fleeing persecution, while all young Mormon men are sent on a two-year "mission." Half go abroad, where they must learn the language, and then work six days a week trying to convert skeptical foreigners to a faith that bans not only alcohol but coffee, too. As many Mormon businessmen have noted, this is excellent preparation for business — and especially international business. L. Todd Budge, the first foreign chief executive of a Japanese bank, was once a Mormon missionary in Japan.

In 1981, the British cabinet Minister Norman Tebbit urged the unemployed to get on their bikes and find work. Today, they could get on their cheap flights. We are all Kupers now.

Simon Kuper is a columnist for the Financial Times, where this article appeared, and the bestselling author of "Soccernomics" and "Football Against the Enemy." He will be speaking in Moscow at the ADV/Independent Media "Future of Media" conference at the Radisson

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/20/the-new-face-of-emigration-a14883