The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Suitcase State of Mind (Op-ed)

A significant segment of the population is packed and ready to go at any time

By Artemy Troitsky

November 27, 2017

Artemy Troitsky seen ahead of a custody hearing for the members of the punk band Pussy Riot accused of hooliganism, at Tagansky district court (Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS)

"Poravalism" — or what you might describe as "Scram-osis" in English — is a new Russian word.

I probably first heard it in the second half of 2012, when the authorities were quashing street demonstrations, President Vladimir Putin regained the Kremlin and the combative and constructive outlook of Russia's youth and "creative class" gave way to a gloomy and pessimistic mood.

"Poravalism" is a compound of two simple Russian words: "пора" (it's time) and "валить"

(to go, clear out, scram.)

Together, they mean "It's time to go" or, more pointedly: "Now it's finally time to clear out of this place – and fast!" Russians sometimes call this being in a "suitcase state of mind," meaning you are ready to pack your things in a rush and get as far away as possible.

You've probably guessed that I'm talking about emigration – the subject that every segment of Russian society is passionately debating these days.

Related article: No Illusions Left, I'm Leaving Russia

Two recent headlines put it this way: "Number of elite Russians leaving for Europe has doubled," and "Country hit by wave of emigration: people lack reason to return to Russia."

Note that the first comes from a financial portal based in Moscow and the second from a provincial news service in the Urals.

Getting an official count is complicated by the fact that most emigrants retain their Russian passports. Some obtain foreign citizenship, some hold a residence permit and others become illegal immigrants. As a rule, estimates place the number of emigrants between 200,000 to 500,000 annually. The State Statistics Service counted 350,000 in 2015, which is 10 times more than in 2010.

Both the number and the types of people leaving are changing.

Back in the 1990s, when emigration reached 250,000 per year, it was mostly the "losers" who packed up and — people who could not integrate into the new wild capitalist reality and who fled the rampant unemployment and social insecurity.

During the booming 2000s, their numbers dwindled to a statistically insignificant 30,000 per year.

But now we see an entirely different picture, with successful and accomplished professionals leading the exodus, despite the fact that many will lose their economic and social status by starting again abroad. This might seem strange, but by way of explanation, I can cite myself as an example.

Our family enjoyed an ideal life in the Moscow area. We had an excellent apartment in our favorite district and a great dacha, our son attended an outstanding preparatory school, and I held interesting and fairly well paid jobs in television, radio, and at Moscow State University.

Yet, in the summer of 2014, we left all that comfort behind and moved to Estonia, not knowing Estonian and holding only a temporary work contract, residence permits, and vague prospects.

We were typical Russian emigrants, except for the fact that I had been blacklisted for my political views that were at odds with the militaristic and hyper-patriotic propaganda flooding the country after the annexation of Crimea, effectively closing the doors to any further professional development for me.

We were also worried for our children.

Our son came home from school one day with the news that, in place of the usual literature class, they had been given a lesson in patriotism. Every student had been forced to don a St. George's ribbon (signifying implicit support for Russia and its current leaders), and the class had been required to watch the film "Stalingrad."

Amazingly, our 3-year-old daughter came home from nursery school asking us about "fascists" and why they (and I'm speaking about the Hitler variety) "wanted to attack Mother Russia." Her teacher had obviously done her job well. It was all of this together – work, school, and the overall mood in society — that prompted us to leave.

Our motivations largely matched those of respondents in a Levada Center survey that found that the 42 percent of Russians who had considered emigrating were primarily attracted by better living conditions abroad. Other than the ecological situation in Russia, I had been happy with my life here.

At 41 percent, the second most common factor cited by the survey was the "unstable economic situation in Russia." Although I lost my job for political reasons, many thousands of professionals in healthcare and education lost theirs through mass layoffs, or have been forced to leave, unable to survive on their meager salaries.

In third place was the desire to "provide a decent future" for their children, with 28 percent of respondents citing this reason. This is just like us.

Most interesting was the fourth reason, the 17 percent who expressed concerns over "the lack of protection from arbitrary abuse from the authorities."

"*It is as if the country itself is ill, steeped in a dreary present, endlessly glorifying its bloody past but completely lacking any vision for its future*"

I would never have thought that political considerations could motivate so many potential emigrants, even though that figure matches almost exactly the notorious 16 percent of Russians who are unhappy with President Vladimir Putin and his regime.

In fact, 15 percent of all Russians are "packed and ready to go" at any time. Of those, 3 percent — or 4 million Russians — have definite plans to emigrate. The remaining 12 percent say they will "probably" leave the country.

This is in keeping with the jaw-dropping forecast made by former Federal Migration Service Deputy Director and current 21st Century Migration Foundation Chairman Vyacheslav Postavnin who said that up to 15 million Russians are expected to move out of the country in the coming years.

An exodus of that size would, by itself, deal a serious blow to the country. But it is compounded by the fact that many of those 15 million are Russia's best and brightest, its educated specialists — doctors, engineers, computer programmers, teachers, bold

businesspeople, members of the fashionable “creative class" and the most ambitious and mobile segment of the country’s youth.

Related article: Russian Journalist Latynina Flees Russia After Attacks

In fact, whereas 15 percent of the overall population is ready to emigrate, an enormous 32 percent of Russians aged 18-24 are ready to move abroad, according to the Levada Center survey. Only a small handful of people, society’s least active and educated members — primarily the elderly parents of the previous generation of emigrants — are not part of the current wave of “poravalism.”

Why is emigration growing?

The reasons are obvious: the worsening economic situation, Russia’s growing international isolation, the well-founded fear that the authorities might close the doors to the West entirely — as they did during Soviet times — the “tightening of the screws” on ideology and political life, on freedom of speech and internet access, and an increase in all forms of repression.

But in my opinion, even more important is the intangible and yet increasingly oppressive sense of hopelessness. The belief that Russia has hit a dead end and that change under the current system is impossible.

It is as if the country itself is ill, steeped in a dreary present, endlessly glorifying its bloody past but completely lacking any vision for its future. It is this – more than the low salaries, the lack of social mobility, and the low quality of education – that is most responsible for the rise in “poravalism.”

Now comes the worst part of all. I do not consider myself an emigrant and do not like it when people call me one.

I prefer the term “expat.” I love Russia and chose to live in Estonia – even though I was also offered work in the U.S. – largely so that I could remain close to home.

I remain right next door in the hope that, one fine day, everything will change, Russia will become free, and I will be able to return and live there happily among my children, grandchildren, and old friends – even if, like most Russian retirees, I must live on a paltry pension.

I think there are a great many Russian expats like myself who are pleasantly addicted to our country – which is not to be confused with the state and its government – and who long to return home.

Regrettably, the paradox of “poravalism” is that, the more of us who leave, the fewer remain who can change the country for the better, and the more tenuous and illusory the hope that we can soon return to be part of a beautiful future for Russia.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/11/27/russia-suitcase-migration-putin-a59713