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Let Me Introduce You to New Creatures in the World

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Эмигрант: emigrant

There was a bit of a flap in the Russian State Duma in recent days that eventually reached the Russian president's press secretary. It concerned a new creature, unknown to millions of native Russian speakers: the релокант. Can you guess what this creature is?

The interesting thing about this word is that is half-borrowed and half-coined. It comes from релокация, which sounds rather exotic but is, of course, the Russian version of the run-of-the-mill English word "relocation." And then that word was reshaped into релокант: a person who relocates, that is, someone who moves to another place (usually abroad) for work.

In the Russian parliament, several deputies proposed that релоканты be tested for fealty when and if they return home. One deputy called for a new legislated term:

недружественный релокант (unfriendly relocator) which would be defined as “человек в своё время не только покинул Россию и работает из-за рубежа, но и сделал это по политическим мотивам, с попыткой унижения своего государства и людей” (a person who didn’t just leave Russia and works abroad, but who was motivated politically to do so and was doing it as an attempt to discredit the [Russian] government).

Now that’s what I call a hidden agenda.

The speaker of the Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, took it a step further. He thought they shouldn’t return to Russia at all. Of course, this didn’t apply to people who really were working on a company project in, say, Kazakhstan, for a year. But if anyone sympathizes with Russia’s enemies, for all his “подлые поступки” (lowdown acts) — he’d get a one-way ticket to Magadan.

Dmitry Peskov, the president’s press secretary, took a more measured approach: "нам не по пути" с релокантами, занявшими антироссийскую позицию и вставшими на сторону киевского режима, а остальных родина "всегда ждёт" (we must “part ways” with anyone who left, has an anti-Russian position and has taken the side of the Kyiv regime [sic], but the homeland “always welcomes” everyone else).

The irony of this is that релоканты chose to call themselves релоканты specifically to avoid any political connotations. As one article about the word and phenomenon explains: Релокант – это мигрант? Да, но есть нюансы (Is someone who relocates for work the same thing as a migrant? Yes — but. There are nuances.) And the main nuance for the writer is: термин релокация пока еще не нагружен такими политическими коннотациями, как эмиграция (the term relocation is not yet weighed down by the political connotations of emigration). Historically and linguistically, “люди эмигрируют в знак протеста, опасаясь репрессий или в надежде выбраться из нищеты, а релоцируются ради построения успешной карьеры” (people emigrate as a sign of protest, out of the fear of repression or in hope of getting out of poverty, but they relocate — note the new Russian verb релоцироваться — to make a successful career).

The writer continues: “Эмиграция — это беда, а релокация — приключение” (Emigration is a disaster, but relocation is an adventure). “Эмиграция — это насовсем, а релокация — там посмотрим” (Emigration is forever, but relocation is “we’ll see how it goes”).

I’d quibble with the bit about “adventure” and disagree that the post-February 2022 релоканты have no political disagreements with the homeland. And indeed, the same article explains that there were two waves of mass departures: февралята (the Februaries) who left for political reasons as soon as the war began, and сентябрята (the Septembers) who left to dodge the draft in the fall of that year. Neither group is truly made up of релоканты, but both would like the Russian authorities to think they were motivated purely by a desire to advance their careers.

Is релокант just a fancy new word for plain old мигранты (migrants)? Well, yes. Мигранты are people who migrate from one place to another, often for work. В их числе трудовые мигранты, предприниматели, безработные, демобилизованные из армии, экологические мигранты и др. (They include work migrants, businesspeople, the

unemployed, people demobilized from the army, migrants due to ecological changes, and so on). But the term мигранты has been used in particular to describe the трудовые мигранты (work migrants) who come to Russia from countries in Central Asia and often work as apartment house janitors/groundskeepers.

By the way, Russian makes the same distinction that English makes between emigrants (эмигранты) and immigrants (иммигранты) — and with the same annoying spelling distinction of one "n" in emigrant and two "n's" in immigrant, and with the same difficulty of remembering which part of the movement you are focusing on — someone's departure from one country (эмигрант) or his or her arrival in another (иммигрант).

It should be noted, however, that the proper Russian term for people who have arrived in your country from abroad is иммигранты (immigrants) and not понаехавшие (goddam foreigners).

Переселенец (emigrant, settler) isn't used much today, largely, I think, because it has strong historical associations. The Google N-gram viewer shows a series of peaks and valleys of usage over the centuries that represent the imperial and Soviet governments' resettlement programs — often вынужденное переселение (forced resettlement) — so it is no wonder that people don't want to identify themselves with this term. Здесь еще много выходцев с Дона — казаков-переселенцев, чьи предки уходили от царя в Сибирь и на восток (There are still a lot of people originally from the Don River here — Cossack settlers whose ancestors fled from the tsar to Siberia and the East).

The rest of the words for "people who left" have strong Soviet or bad vibes, and sometimes Soviet bad vibes. No one wants to be or be called беженец (refugee), someone forced to flee for political, religious, or dire economic reasons. These people usually cannot return to their home countries. Сейчас он живёт как политический беженец где-то в Европе (Now he is living somewhere in Europe as a political refugee).

Беглец (fugitive, runaway, refugee) is the brother of беженец. But беглец often has the sense of someone running from the law. In the case of Russia, where people are routinely convicted of ideological crimes *in absentia*, this often makes them Good People, not Bad Outlaws. Here's the description of a cemetery in Europe that makes the contrasts and similarities clear: На этом кладбище примиренно сошлись обманутые и обманщики, беженцы и беглецы, те, кто мечтал вернуться на родину, и те, кто вспомнил о ней лишь перед смертью, люди разных убеждений, разной славы, но все они считали себя русскими (In this cemetery lie peacefully side by side the deceived and deceivers, refugees and fugitives, those who dreamed of returning to their homeland and those who remembered it only just before death, people of various convictions and fame, but they all considered themselves Russian.)

But another kind of runner was definitely an outlaw in the Soviet state: перебежчик (defector, turncoat, deserter). This is the person who runs to the other side and provides information and aid to harm his or her homeland. Or sometimes they run back to do harm: А перебежчики разные бывают: один просто бросил ружье и побежал, а другие никуда не бегут, а сидят в наших штабах и работают (There are all kinds of defectors. Some just threw down their weapons and ran, but other don't run away. They stay at home and work in their headquarters).

In the Soviet period, there was another kind of traitor (from the point of view of the authorities). They didn't run across the border. And they didn't necessarily work against their homeland. They just went abroad legally and never came back: невозвращенцы (people who didn't return; defectors). Ипатьев послан был в заграничную командировку и не вернулся. Появился термин "невозвращенец" (Ipatiev was sent abroad on a business trip and didn't come back. That's when the term "non-returnee" appeared). Мой советский дядя проклинал рок-музыку, невозвращенца Барышникова и генерала Андрея Власова (My Soviet uncle cursed rock music, the defector Baryshnikov and General Andrei Vlasov).

And finally, there is the simple term уехавший (someone who left). When you look at the N-gram viewer, both the words уехавший and невозвращенец have shown a sharp rise in usage starting in 2014.

And that's not counting the релоканты.

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