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Heading Back Home

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Russia Profile

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Repatriation as a Trend is Gaining Momentum

Russia is becoming a more lucrative neighborhood. Nothing better attests to this fact than a growing number of Russian emigrants returning from some of the most prosperous countries to resettle in their Motherland.

Russia's vast, mysterious interior always attracted foreigners seeking adventure and high-stake opportunities. At the same time, the country's turbulent history compelled countless able brains to look for a better life elsewhere. Today, Russia is attracting more and more of its former citizens to pursue their high ambitions in the land they once either tactically left behind or desperately fled.

There are no official statistics about the number of repatriates currently settled in Russia. Nevertheless, according to Tremayne Elson, managing director of Antal International Russia Recruitment Company, Russian repatriates "are coming back in increasing numbers."

Repatriation taxonomy

Russian repatriates may be grouped into three basic categories. First, there are those who left Russia only to work or study abroad and then came back. The second category is comprised of those individuals who emigrated from Russia or the Soviet Union, assumed their host country's citizenship but did not reject their Russian one, and later returned home. There are also those who left Russia or the Soviet Union and gave up their citizenships while assuming their host country's citizenship, but still returned to Russia.

There is also a generational dimension to repatriation. Those whose parents or grandparents emigrated from Russia may be classified as second and third generation repatriates, respectively.

Russian repatriate from the United States Svetlana Ushakova describes herself as "a citizen of the world." When she returned to Russia in 2005 to work for a French advertising agency, she reunited with many of her family members and friends.

Ushakova says that the fact that she has an American, as opposed to a Russian, passport does not matter to her employer, and she has had job offers from numerous companies in Russia. While she hopes to start a family here, she plans to hold on to her American citizenship and await better economic conditions in the United States. "Now I have a job that I love, and since it's a year of recession in the U.S. economy, I'll consider coming back to the United States after having a family," she explained.

"There are still some benefits in the Russian society—people are mostly very compassionate," Ushakova says, but admits that Russia has a way to go before becoming a country in which she would want to raise her children. "Russia seems to remain quite a closed society and it's great to realize that my future kids are free to choose where to live [by having an American passport]." Moreover, according to Ushakova, Russian corporate culture makes it difficult for her to plan a long-term career in her native land. "Russia is a very 'macho' country. It is still obvious that men are dominating in top management positions and making expensive purchasing decisions, whereas in the United States everything is much more liberal," she said.

Fourth-generation repatriate and graphic designer Timothy Kirby was recruited by a Russian company that develops and publishes online and casual games. The offer of a monthly salary of \$1,000 satisfied Kirby, and he moved to Moscow in early 2007 with long-term plans.

"When I was making \$1,000 per month in Russia, I was living twice as well as when I was making \$1,600 per month in the United States, because there I had to also pay for gasoline and to live with my parents, which is not normal for an American

male,” 26-year-old Kirby explains.

In less than a year, Kirby’s salary increased to \$1,500. The young designer admits that this made dating in Russia easier and, being young, he also does not worry about health-related expenses.

In addition to having a better material and personal life, Kirby enjoys the Russian culture. The Russian side of his family immigrated to the United States before the October Revolution and, since then, the addresses of those who stayed behind have been lost. Nevertheless, Kirby, who speaks highly proficient Russian, finds himself more comfortable in Russia than in the United States. He admits that life in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was born, has been difficult for him. “Where I am from, most people are poor, uneducated and angry. Most of their jobs went abroad. Everyday, no matter what I did, I felt like everyone hated me because of my race.” [Kirby grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood.]

Kirby was not always in love with Russia. “When I was a kid, I remember we used to play the ‘kill the Russians’ game. I used to want to be in the army and serve America,” he describes. Then, disillusionment came. Kirby describes that after the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado, his life became even more difficult. After the shooting, his high school peers were asked by the school administration to list those they thought were capable of committing such an atrocity. Kirby’s name came up and, consequently, the police searched his entire house looking for clues, which they ultimately did not find.

After completing his undergraduate degree in design in Pennsylvania, Kirby joined the Peace Corps, an organization that sends American volunteers to developing countries. Kirby asked to be sent to a country in which Russian was spoken so that he could re-connect with his Russian roots. Since Russia closed its Peace Corps program by the time he joined the organization, Kirby was sent to Kazakhstan. The experience, which included living on a collective farm and teaching English at a local school, gave him the confidence to move to Russia.

Born in Volgograd and just twelve years old when she parted with Russia, Vera Volchansky did not have a vote when her family decided to immigrate to the United States. As she grew up, she became fascinated by Russian music and, after completing her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in conducting at the University of Kansas, went to St. Petersburg as an American Fulbright Scholar eager to learn more about 20th century and contemporary Russian composers.

The talented musician says that it took her only a week to adjust to Russia. “I easily associate with the people here, I love Russian culture and the people,” Volchansky said. “If it so happens that I find a job I like in Russia, I would love to stay and work. Would I stay for life? Well, my four sisters and parents are in the United States, and so are my two adorable little nieces, and a brother-in-law. So I don’t know if I should let the ocean separate us for life. But, on the other hand, the world is only getting smaller, so who knows? One thing I do know, though, is that my soul is truly Russian, and I would not trade that for anything in the world.” In addition to serving as home away from home to countless Americans with Russian heritage, Russia has experienced a surge of repatriates from Israel. Today, there are roughly 100,000 Russian-Jewish repatriates from Israel living in Moscow.

According to Alexander Boroda, Board Chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia, Russian-Jewish repatriates are motivated to return to Russia by three major factors. First, their expectations of Israel did not match the sometimes brutal reality on the ground. Second, the growing number of economic opportunities in Russia motivates many to build a better life there. Finally, the level of anti-Semitism in Russia, according to Boroda, no longer exceeds that of a typical European country.

Hearts, minds and visas

While Russian culture may be at the heart of repatriation, economic considerations are at its head.

A leading expert on Russian repatriation from the European University at St. Petersburg, Alexander Kurylev, said that in the 1990s the major factor driving contemporary Russian repatriation was political openness of the country and its emerging market, but “now Russia’s spectacular economic growth is probably one of the most influential factors.” He adds that this factor could become more influential were Russia to become more deeply integrated into the global economy.

Elson points out that those most likely to thrive in the Russian market for mid to senior level jobs are those who have been successful in the West, and can easily reintegrate into the Russian society. The job categories that experience the biggest shortage of labor supply in Russia include legal, retail, business to business, accounting, marketing, and investment banking front office positions.

Repatriates encounter less competition from their foreign colleagues since life in Russia, especially outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, is still incredibly challenging for most outsiders, not least because of the language barrier. "Russia is not on the backpacker trail for the young, professional migrant expat community like Prague, Budapest, London, Paris and New York. It's incredibly rare to find people just turning up in Moscow, loving it and wanting to stay," Elson explains.

New Russian visa regulations make it even more difficult for foreigners and repatriates without Russian citizenship to settle in Russia for the long-term with no job already lined-up. As of October 2007, foreigners with multiple entry business visas are allowed to stay in Russia for a total of 90 days out of every 180. Moreover, those who have not received a year-long multiple entry commercial visa before October 2007 must now settle for a one-to-three-month, single-or-double-entry commercial visa. To renew commercial visas, most foreigners need to return to their native countries and apply at the Russian consulate there, an especially expensive feat for Americans and citizens of other far-away countries.

Elson pointed out that as a result of the new visa regulations, repatriates are increasingly more driven to Russia by "a specific job and the opportunities it provides, salary and career advancement." He also adds that sometimes he comes across "young or middle aged Western men who have fallen in love with a Russian girl and want to seek work here [in Russia]." He admits that those who are "romance-motivated" are usually politely rejected.

In addition to stricter visa rules, Russian law prevents Russian government officials from having dual citizenships. Meanwhile, as Kurylev points out, repatriates coming to Russia from the West are generally unwilling to part with their citizenship of another country. "I am yet to hear about a re-immigrant who gave up U.S. or UK citizenship in order to get employment in Russian government structures," he says.

Kurylev explains that repatriates in Russia "have a status very close to that of a foreigner in both legal and social terms. I call it a 'doubly dislocated status.' They neither fully belong to their previous host society nor to the home society. They are new cosmopolites—citizens of the world who help to integrate Russia into the world economy by promoting new transnational business ethics and professional skills, which are more common for the global rather than the local market."

A sustained phenomenon

Historically, repatriates from Western countries played an active and important role in strengthening the Russian economy. For example, the three largest Moscow plants—the Russian-American Instrumental Plant (later renamed the Moscow Instrumental Plant), the Auto-Mechanical Plant (later renamed Likhachev's Plant, also known in Russia as ZIL) and the Clothing Factory of the Third Internationale, were established with the active participation of re-immigrants from the United States during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period of Soviet history, when some elements of market economy were introduced to stimulate the country's economic growth. At the same time, about twenty agricultural communes were created by repatriates in various regions of Russia during the NEP period.

Kurylev pointed out that there are also examples of tragic and unsuccessful repatriation stories during other historical periods. One of them was described in the Oscar-nominated movie "East West." The movie gives a tragic account of a young Russian doctor who returns to his homeland after the Second World War with his French wife and son. His decision to come back was a result of Stalin's propaganda campaign aimed at attracting Russian emigrants living in the West by offering them an amnesty and a Soviet passport. The main intention of the returnees during this period was to help rebuild their home country after the war. But right upon their arrival to Stalin's Russia, they faced an unexpected welcome. Many of them were executed on the spot or sent to forced labor camps.

The more recent and non-fictional example is the European University in St. Petersburg, established in 1994 by Russian scholars who studied and worked abroad at Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, Columbia, Stanford and Berkeley. Together with the most prominent scholars from the Russian Academy of Sciences, these academic repatriates built a world-class social sciences and humanities graduate school in Russia. Just after 10 years of its existence, EUSP became the only Russian university admitted in the LSE top 100 best European centers in political science. However, in February 2008, the university was temporarily closed down by the Russian authorities for violating fire safety rules.

Kurylev cautions that repatriates are most likely to exert a strong and positive influence on the Russian economy and society when the country has the capacity and tendency for further economic growth and the government creates a favorable environment for the repatriates' integration. Otherwise, potential repatriates will most likely not consider returning to their Motherland and, often times, those who have returned will leave the country again.