EKATERINA PURGINA

STORIES EMIGRANTS TELL: THE NEW RUSSIAN EXODUS IN TELEGRAM BLOGS

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Belgrade, 2024

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:
Gazela Pudar Draško, Sanja Bojanić

Title:
Stories Emigrants Tell: The New Russian Exodus in Telegram Blogs

Author:
Ekaterina Purgina

Publishers:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,University of Belgrade
Center for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe, University of Rijeka

Proofreader:
Edward Djordjevic

Cover design:
Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:
Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:
Belgrade, 2024

ISBN:
978-86-82324-55-3

Printed by:
Donat Graf, Beograd

Print run:
100

INSTITUT
ZA FILOZOFIJU
I DRUŠTVENU
TEORIJU

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This text is the result of a joint fellowship program at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade, and the Center for Advances Studies Southeast Europe of the University of Rijeka. Views expressed in the text are the author's own.

Stories Emigrants Tell: The New Russian Exodus in Telegram Blogs

Experts estimate that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, approximately one million people have left Russia (Sergeeva, Kamalov 2024). In 2022, the exodus came in two large waves: the so-called February wave, which mainly consisted of educated people from large Russian cities with income and professional skills sufficient to sustain themselves abroad in the short- and medium-term, a significant part of them employed in the IT sector (Gizitdinov, Bedwell 2022). The second wave – the September wave – was triggered by the announcement of "partial mobilization," causing draft-age men to flee with little resources, often without foreign passports and a lack of understanding of what they were going to do once they crossed Russia's border. Many later returned to Russia when the perceived risks of mobilization subsided, and their meager funds were depleted (Babich 2023).

The figure of 1 million is a rough estimate given that people are moving back and forth for various reasons, like retrieving documents, getting medical treatment, or visiting family. Additionally, when facing challenges in their host country, some may temporarily return to Russia to sort out their finances, sell property, and then make a more prepared attempt to relocate.

But who are the real people hidden behind these numbers? What drove their decision to leave their country? What are their daily struggles to rebuild their lives in a foreign land, to survive their separation from their families and friends – both physical and ideological? The stories these people tell on various social media platforms such as Telegram and Facebook can give us some answers to these questions. Interspersed with videos and memes ("If you stare at a suffering Russian in Istanbul for a long time, you can eventually see him suffering in Belgrade") and tips for fellow emigrants (such as where to buy authentic tvorog or how to persuade local banks to open an account), these texts reach Russian-speaking audiences both in host countries and back in Russia. By starting their blogs on social platforms, emigrants seek mutual support and make sense of their experiences, including the loss of home and social connections, disruption of their lifestyle, and the moral anxiety about responsibility for the war in Ukraine.

Although my study centers on the stories of just six individuals (more if family members are counted), many people are dealing with similar challenges and dilemmas.[1]

[1] All of the Telegram channels were publicly open and available as of the time of research (2022-2023): *Or vovnutr*, /t.me/screaminsideofme (created on 4 Februrary 2022); *Lalalanam*, /t.me/lalalanam (created on 25 February 2022); *Yul, a ty seychas gde?* /t.me/julxenishere (created on 11 March 2022); *Alyona v poiskhakh doma*, /t.me/

The analysis focuses on the blogs created after 24 February 2022 in Telegram and covers a period of about a year, the most arduous and traumatic stage of emigration. All the storytellers share an anti-war stance and initially possessed sufficient resources to relocate and start a new life in their chosen host countries. They opted for countries with facilitated visa regimes (such as Turkey, Serbia, Argentina, or Montenegro) because they expected no support from the EU or other western countries with tight emigration rules and higher cost of living.

For war-induced Russian emigrants, answering the question "Who am I now?" proved challenging, and their uncertainties and discomfort are mirrored in the debates about self-designation: are we emigrants, refugees, exiles. The term "relocation" (borrowed from business companies moving their staff and operations elsewhere) often appears preferable, as it mitigates the emotional weight of recognizing that this might indeed be a one-way journey. While they feel that their home was taken away from them (being "pulled like a carrot from a garden bed") they also acknowledge that moving abroad was a decision, a moral choice. Therefore, neither (involuntary) refuge and exile nor (voluntary) emigration quite capture their out-of-home situation. Gradually they have come to the realization that a return home is impossible. Slow normalization of the war in Russia is no less unacceptable than the sudden invasion. But more importantly, the Russia they lived in and cherish in their memory ("frozen in time like a fly in amber") no longer exists.

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[1] alenaislookingforahome (created on 16 April 2022); *Pereselenets – Serbia*, /t.me/greatmig (created on 29 September 2022); *Emigrantka s detmi*, /t.me/russianmigrant (created on 4 November 2022). All of the quotes are provided in English, the translations from Russian are mine.

In their first year of emigration, all the authors remained closely connected to Russia. They actively followed the country's developments, extensively commenting on the news and expressing their horror of the ongoing violence. Relying on their first-hand experience, they also objected to the stigmatization and discrimination of Russians abroad as "people-without-the-right-kind-of-passports."

Narrators often turn to history and literature to make sense of their predicament: the white Russian émigrés belonging to the post-revolutionary wave or political emigrations in 1930s and 1940s from Europe. These ruminations are connected to another term that is widely circulated in emigrants' narratives - *uekhavshiye* ("those who have left" or "leavers"), which stands in implicit (or sometimes explicit) opposition to *ostavshiyesya* ("those who have stayed" or "remainers"). The stories describe confrontations with families, friends, and colleagues in Russia, who are accusing emigrants of "betrayal" and "leaving in distress," as well as sudden online attacks from "vigilant citizens," arguing that the decision to leave has stripped emigrants of the right to express any opinions about whatever is happening in Russia (summarized with the formula "you've left, so now just shut up"). Thus, the moral divide goes not only between those who are pro-war and anti-war but also between the leavers and remainers, even though the latter two groups may largely share the same views on the ongoing events.

Another recurrent motif of the first year emigration stories was the probability of ever coming back home. The war ruptured the narrators' personal lives, creating a "huge, deep, gaping hole," and set off the countdown for departure: emigrants depict how the new normalcy that emerged after the initial shock of February 24 started to weigh them down as "some kind of a weird surrealist

nightmare." They no longer felt safe around the people they knew so well – their local communities and neighbors: "An extra tinge of horror inside of me comes from the nasty feeling that there is somebody out there who is actually enjoying it, among my fellow countrymen. Maybe I even shared the same school desk with them. Examples abound – a good old friend of mine (I'm writing 'good' and I can't figure out how all this can co-exist inside of him) at the end of February surprised me with a sudden flow of words I had never heard him say before [...]. What particularly horrified me was that it came from a person who spent his whole life peacefully marinating mushrooms, loving animals and never in his life had said a rude word to anybody."

The question that persists in all the narratives, in various forms, is whether emigrants will ever cease being foreigners and find a new home. Is home a one-time, unbreakable tie to one's motherland, or can a new home be built elsewhere? Can home be relocated with you, like Howl's Moving Castle in Miyazaki's animation movie? The answer remains elusive but the stories reveal the coexistence of two visions of home: one lost and mourned, and the other born in the bits and pieces of daily life — furniture rearranged, house plants adopted, new kitchenware purchased, boxes unpacked, and the dog or cat finally reuniting with the owners after a challenging transportation process. These attempts to create a home in the foreign land are themselves empowering as they provide emigrants with a renewed sense of life's meaningfulness.

Newly arrived migrants often find themselves caught in the crossfire between those who stayed behind and emigrants from earlier waves. The majority of their conflicts with current and former compatriots take place online, while the lives of local communities run parallel, somewhat removed.

Emigrants typically experience much less inner conflict when dealing with the locals, meticulously describing simple interactions in places like shops, cafes, and banks and their first steps in mastering the language. More opportunities for integration are enjoyed by emigrants with school-age children, with parent-teacher nights and birthday parties to be attended, thus avoiding encapsulation within their own language and the confines of the Russian-speaking community.

Adaptation struggles – feelings of isolation and frustration, coupled with myriad seemingly small yet time-consuming and effort-demanding daily tasks that tend to become overwhelming – are approached by emigrants as a quest or adventure. The new language environment exacerbates the profound sense of uncertainty and disorientation as emigrants are getting used to living "in a constant state of misunderstanding." Coping with these tasks makes up a considerable part of the blogs: the narrators proudly report their first successes in language mastery such as ordering food in a cafe ("without a word of English") or engaging in casual conversations with locals.

The process of adaptation and learning may seem slow and sometimes painful but inevitable, it unfolds through small discoveries and encounters. While Russia is seen as more remote over time, but also hostile and menacing, the current location, on the contrary, gradually transforms into a safer and more welcoming place: what was discouraging, such as Belgrade's ubiquitous graffiti, turns into convenient points of reference, familiar signs used for navigating the city streets ("Adaptation comes over you unnoticeably. You stop looking at your watch thinking that 'in Moscow it's one hour earlier'. You stop calculating prices in rubles. Then you stop comparing prices at all. You stop remembering what else in your country has been banned, closed or opened. *We* – it is here now").

Russian emigrants develop their new identities through the stories they tell online: these stories are woven into diverse and fragmented narratives about their journeys in foreign countries, following their sudden departure. They redesign their concept of home as the prospect of returning to their former lives fades. Despite this gradual adaptation, political divisions that caused their departure and were brought from their homeland with them continue to influence their self-understanding and prospects of integration into their new communities.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

314.15(=161.1)"20"
316.728(=161.1)"20"

PURGINA, Ekaterina, 1982-
Stories Emigrants Tell : the New Russian Exodus in Telegram Blogs / Ekaterina Purgina. - Belgrade : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University ; Rijeka : Center for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe, University, 2024 (Beograd : Donat Graf). - 11 стр. ; 18 cm. - (Book Series Square / [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade])

Tiraž 100. - Bibliografija: str. 11

ISBN 978-86-82324-55-3

а) Емиграције, руске -- 21в б) Руси -- Свакодневни живот -- 21в

COBISS.SR-ID 141227273