DOI:10.55337/35.KIOI4960

What will the Russian Diaspora Do When "Dvizhukha" Starts at Home?

by Sergei Erofeev

This 2021 paper discusses the prehistory and some elements of political culture of the new Russian emigration which has been growing since the return of Putin as Russia's president. Following a sociological study, I argue that a qualitative change occurred between 2012 and 2018 in the moods and action predispositions of the new émigrés which can contribute to a strong anti-authoritarian political culture of a significant part of the diaspora. Small recent additions deal with the Seventh Wave of emigration caused by Putin's war in Ukraine, and the possibilities of structuration and further mobilization of the cross-border Russian prodemocracy movement.

Keywords: Russian diaspora, political culture, potentiality, structuration, movement, effective opposition

This article was first published in German in October 2021. In February 2022 Putin's Russia started an all-out war not only against Ukraine but virtually against the whole free world, so the concept of "dvizhukha" (movement, agitation, stir, commotion) has to be approached slightly differently. The meaning of the word has now expanded to include the entirety of popular shock and stir, the new Russian democratic and antiwar resistance as well as the radical Russian government's actions all the way to the massive war crimes in Ukraine and, possibly, by the moment of the article's English publication, mass terror against the people of Russia.

It has been more than two years since our Atlantic Council's report on the new Russian emigration was published.[1] Looking at the period between 2000 and 2018 and entitled "The Putin Exodus: The New Russian Brain Drain", the report intended to draw international attention to the qualitative change in the population outflow from a country which, throughout the Cold War decades, acted as one of the two world superpowers.

The change, we argued, was in principle twofold. First, the emigration wave that we mark as the Sixth significantly differed from those we numbered Three (the World War II emigration), Four (the Second Jewish emigration) and Five (the "sausage emigration" during the early post-Soviet economic troubles).[2] This emigration was neither predominantly politically driven or due to ethnic deprivation. Nor was it caused by serious economic hardship. Instead, with open borders, growing global awareness as well as new material and linguistic resources

enabling them to go abroad, more diverse populations ventured to explore new vistas without the danger of losing connection with the home country forever.

A key characteristic of the Sixth Wave uniting people of different geographic, ethnic, occupational, and other backgrounds became a high level of education coupled with a sense of entrepreneurship and free exploration in an increasingly physically and digitally interconnected world. In fact, soon after 2000, when Vladimir Putin became president, a significant return of Russians who, due to their experience abroad, had gained new knowledge and other resources, started to match the outflow. A certain perspective opened up, that of cultural and economic reinvestment into the country based on brain gain as a part of the growing global brain circulation. This continued up to Putin's second decade when the other aspect of the wave's change became obvious.

This second aspect is basically about the growing dissatisfaction with Russia's political, economic, and cultural prospects. Instead of developing a career or business that might lead to double benefits from engaging the homeland, the younger, more active, and better educated Russians on both sides of the border started to think of building their future away from the economic restrictions and political repressions which gradually became so characteristic of Putin's political system.

In our report, we argued that it was the 2011 back-shifting of the presidency between Vladimir Putin and his seat-warmer Dmitry Medvedev that provoked a radical, albeit not immediately discernible, change in the political sentiments of the more dynamic Russians both at home and in diaspora. Putin's decision in 2011 to sacrifice Russia's development to his endless stay in power was soon followed by extraordinary steps that shocked the world, but which were, in retrospect, unavoidable for sustaining such a political system. Using the "Crimea incorporation effect", the only country other than the USA capable of nuclear destruction of the planet crossed the post-WWII red lines of European non-aggression.

By all accounts, this was done to secure public support for Putin's rule when it started to wane. However, instead of boosting Kremlin-style patriotism, post-Soviet revanchism caused fears and aversion among most new Russian émigrés. Gradually, the Crimea effect subsided due to growing concerns of Russians with excessive high-level corruption,[3] the neglect of people's fundamental needs[4] and, subsequently, with Putinism beginning to resort to terror and violence.[5] This is how we justified the title of our Putin Exodus report: through surveys and focus groups conducted in 2017-18 in four major destinations of the new Russian émigrés in the US and Europe,[6] we detected a statistically significant shift in their political moods. Now the Sixth Wave looked more like an exodus of the younger, brighter, and more active from a land where their talents and life prospects were going to be neglected and even threatened.

Our most striking finding, however, was the difference between those who

left Russia before and since 2012, the year of the first massive crackdown on the protest against electoral fraud and antidemocratic politics. Comparing the values, expectations and attitudes of the respondents representing the emigration cohort of 2000-2011 vs that of 2012-2017, we labelled the second one "Wave 6.2" since it was qualitatively dissimilar to the first sub-wave in being less politically indifferent, more critical of the Russian authorities and, remarkably, supportive of the leading Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny and his team already then. It also turned out that those who emigrated later were inclined to follow the real effective opposition[7] in Russia in various ways – from showing support and approval through social media to participating in protests and funding projects like Navalny's anti-corruption investigations.

Some remarks in our focus groups showed that despite the seeming inactivity of the Russian émigrés, they were only just waiting for a moment of "*dvizhukha*" (as mentioned above: movement, agitation, something that promises change). Little we knew then about what was going to happen in just a few years in Belarus, the country closest to Russia in terms of political culture. Today, broadest audiences both in Belarus and Russia are aware that 2020 was marked not only by unprecedented mass protests in Minsk and other Belarussian cities against the unlawful retention of power by Alexander Lukashenko through electoral fraud and political repressions, but also by vast mobilization of the Belarussian diaspora engaging in all kinds of activities in support of the protesters at home.

Despite the anti-democratic endorsement of Putin's unrestricted rule through the "constitutional vote" designed to cement the system and create the impression of its mass popular support, a new kind of *dvizhukha* unfolded in Russia in 2020 as well. Proportionally to the population, nothing like the Khabarovsk protests against the arrest of a freely elected and popular regional governor – who turned to representing *vlast*[8] "with a human face" – had ever before struck the streets of Russian cities. Unfolding in parallel with the Belarussian protests, these rallies were preceded and inspired by the success of smaller regional protests. Importantly, Khabarovsk protesters also built on the 2019 Moscow eruption of election-induced protests when the real effective opposition's attempts to register its candidates for the city legislature were brutally crushed.

Following these developments, 2021 brought even more shocks to the diaspora. During the previous year, the Kremlin's unsuccessful attempt at a "final solution" to the "Navalny problem" using the Novichok military-grade toxin led to the unlawful imprisonment of Putin's main political opponent in January 2021. The protests against this injustice boosted by another powerful disclosure of Putin's grandiose corruption by Navalny[9] provoked massive street protests around the country despite the Kremlin's use of the pandemic as a muzzle. This became the moment when the Russian diaspora showed that it really had awaken and started to follow the Belarussian pattern of fighting for democracy all around the world. Dozens of

cities across all continents saw previously politically inactive immigrants protest in front of Russian diplomatic missions, all the way up to the unprecedented rallies in Geneva during the Biden-Putin summit in June 2017.[10] Considering that the anti-democratic legislation in Russia had been severely tightened since 2012, the pro-Navalny protest showed that Russian citizens became ready to its much higher costs in terms of not only losing their well-being but homeland and even freedom.

It can be argued that if a comprehensive study of the Russian diaspora were conducted now, it would reveal even a greater shift of political moods towards the real effective opposition. Today, the diaspora is watching Putin system's shift from legitimacy built on electoral techniques and propaganda to power built on violence. It is still far from what the Belarussian diaspora has experienced since the existential presidential elections in Russia are still yet to come. Yet, the contempt for the law and the people's will demonstrated by the ruling elite in the 2021 parliamentary elections has further outraged the émigrés who took to the streets of free "western" cities from January to April. Between winter and summer 2021, they have created numerous political groups and clubs, come up with many events and initiatives and continued to build a politically driven globally networked community. However loose, this community looks like the first ever Russian political force abroad since the White Emigration a hundred years ago.

One thing which clearly distinguishes the new Russian emigration, even in its infancy, as a political force different than the White Emigration is that there is no longer a homeland beyond its reach. The events at home now have more bearing on everyday life up to the émigrés' unprecedented self-mobilization to participate in the September 2021 parliamentary vote on all continents.[11] As their social media activities demonstrate, many of them are supportive of Navalny's "Smart Voting" strategy to consolidate protest votes against Putin's monopolist United Russia party in the wake of the total ban on independent candidates from running for parliamentary seats.[12] More than that, in coordination with Navalny's team, the "Vote Abroad" initiative is gaining momentum.[13]

In view of these developments, time may have come for analysts to think of a Seventh Wave of Russian emigration beginning in 2020. It would partly include anti-Putinists from the Sixth Wave, but it would mainly signal a critical mass of newly involved intellectually and politically influential Russians joining the diaspora. As The New York Times point out, "experts say the current exodus of journalists and dissidents is the biggest wave of political emigration in the country's post-Soviet history".[14] This is practically an understatement since this wave, in terms of its cultural and political capital, is more likely to be the biggest since a hundred years ago.

As contemporary emigration researchers point out, today "emigrants represent an increasingly critical category of transnational political actors."[15] With the presumably growing power of those who emigrate from a country of special

significance to maintaining and developing the international liberal democratic order, the world's attention should be turned to what *dvizhukha* in the country of their origin can do to the diaspora.

About the author

Dr. Sergei Erofeev, Rutgers University USA, sociologist. Before emigrating from Russia for political reasons in 2015, he was one of the pioneers of cultural sociology and new global education in the country. He has worked as a Vice Rector of the Higher School of Economics, Moscow, the Dean of International Programs at the European University at Saint Petersburg, and the founding director of the Center for the Sociology of Culture at Kazan Federal University, Tatarstan, Russia. A scholar of culture, emigration, and communication, he has led large-scale international research and curriculum development projects. He is currently working on the methodology of research in "tectonic value shifts" (TVS), mafia state culture and the cultural practices of terrorism. His recent publications include: "The Putin Exodus: The New Russian Brain Drain" (with J. Herbst), The Atlantic Council of United States, and 'Opposing Vlast: The Kasparov–Volkov Debate and New Critical Perspectives on Russia', Ab Imperio, 2/2022.

Endnotes

1 Herbst, John, and Sergei Erofeev. The Putin Exodus: The New Russian Brain Drain. Atlantic Council, 2019. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Putin-Exodus.pdf.

2 Unlike previous observers, we count Russian emigration waves not from the "White" wave during the times of the Bolshevik revolution and the Russian Civil war, but from the First Jewish emigration of the late 19th–early 20th century.

3 A critical impetus to the shift in public moods was provided by Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation's investigations delivered to wide audiences through their YouTube channel. This led to massive protest rallies across the country during Navalny's 2017 presidential campaign trail ("Don't call him 'Dimon'": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7_GF9g).

4 Soon after his presidential reelection in 2018, Putin increased the general retirement age, breaking his promise not to do so.

5 See my column about this change on "Reforum": https://reforum.io/blog/2020/07/22/obnulenie-po-ponyatiyam-ili-krizis-russkoj-taburetki.

6 The surveys and focus groups were conducted in New York City, Silicon Valley, London, and Berlin.

7 Analysts often use the term "non-systemic opposition" as opposed to the fully controlled parliamentary parties in Russia. However, it is insufficient in that it does not distinguish between those who actively and successfully oppose Russian crony capitalism and those who content themselves with just oppositional rhetoric.

8 Directly transliterating the word "власть" as "vlast" is more helpful to denote simultaneously "power", "authorities" and "government" in the Russian context.

9 See "Putin's Palace" film: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Putin%27s_Palace_(film)

10 The Associated Press. "The Latest: Pro-Navalny Protest in Geneva on Eve of Summit | AP News." AP News, June 15, 2021. Accessed August 15, 2023. https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-donald-trump-joe-biden-europe-global-trade-6b4edec3e71c3dbaa831b22e34663fe4.

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