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BRAIN DRAIN FROM RUSSIA

THE KREMLIN'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The accelerated brain drain from Russia concretizes the failures of the Kremlin's authoritarian modernization and deepens the country's longer-term problems. At the same time, the brain drain is reducing the regime's political pressures to make the country more attractive to educated and internationally oriented citizens.

It is estimated that 1.6 to 2 million people have emigrated from Russia during the nearly 20-year period of Vladimir Putin's rule. In the light of these figures, some researchers talk about the fifth wave of emigration in Russian history. Emigration has accelerated particularly since Putin began his third presidency in 2012, and in 2017, for example, an estimated 377,000 people moved out of Russia.

However, the actual number of people leaving the country is controversial because of vague statistics on immigration and emigration. For instance, the Russian State Statistics Center *Rosstat* classifies as emigrants those non-Russian persons who have entered the country with a work permit and who leave after it expires, but who often return soon after. An even

more challenging statistical deficit concerns Russians who live abroad permanently but who, according to statistics, remain in Russia. A study by the *Presidential Academy of the Russian National Economy and Public Administration* estimates that almost 90 percent of Russians living abroad retain their place of residence in Russia and are therefore still classified as residents.

This discrepancy is supported by data obtained by comparing emigration statistics reported by *Rosstat* with the migration statistics of destination countries. For example, in 2016 *Rosstat* announced that approximately 5,000 people had moved to Germany, whereas according to the German statistics, approximately 25,000 people had migrated from Russia that

same year. In general, differences between the statistics show that the number of citizens that have emigrated from Russia exceeds the number recorded by *Rosstat* six-fold.

An indisputable feature in the ambiguous Russian emigration statistics is the accelerated brain drain. Approximately 58,000 highly educated people emigrated from Russia in 2017, with emigrants in the 30 to 34 age group being the most common.

In the light of Russia's demographic dynamics, emigration has not been a quantitative problem, as migrant workers, especially from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, have greatly exceeded the number of emigrants. They have filled low-paid, low-productivity vacancies, often being at the mer-

cy of the shadow economy without proper labour rights. However, in 2018, immigration no longer compensated for the natural decline in the population, and the demographic trend in Russia turned negative.

Regardless of better opportunities and a more open atmosphere, Russia's central cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg in particular, are not able to provide sufficient conditions to retain high-skilled and internationally oriented citizens in Russia. The accelerated brain drain is primarily a challenge related to globalization and points to the inability of Putin's regime to fulfil the goals of economic modernization and better labour productivity, echoed in the Kremlin's rhetoric for years.

Attractive labour markets for highly educated citizens are vital for economic modernization. However, such markets entail political risks. While the first decade of economic growth in the 21st century offered new opportunities for all Russians, including internationally oriented citizens in big cities, the expectations of the latter changed dramatically after 2011. The political dimension of the accelerated brain drain is related to the post-protest turn of 2011–12. This is reflected not only in the number of emigrants,

but particularly in the reasons why they have left the country. Based on interviews with Russian emigrants, the three main reasons for emigration after 2012 have been the political climate in Russia, the lack of civil liberties, and the lack of economic perspectives. For those who emigrated before 2012, on the other hand, these reasons comprised education, financial insecurity and professional aspects.

The political dimension of emigration is also reflected in the increase in the number of asylum seekers originating from Russia, especially since 2012. The number of applicants has increased year by year, far exceeding the figures of the early 1990s. In 2017, approximately 12,700 Russians sought refuge in EU countries, while in the same year nearly three thousand applied for asylum in the US. Correspondingly, the correlation between the willingness to move and the spirit of opposition is evident in surveys on the willingness to emigrate. In 2018, among the adult population who approve of Putin's actions, the willingness to emigrate was 12%, while the figure for those opposing Putin was 40%.

In the political sense, however, the willingness of the highly educated, critical and opposition-minded citizens to emigrate,

or their actual emigration, does not pose a problem for the authoritarian regime in the short term. In effect, it offers a built-in valve for releasing growing social dissatisfaction by keeping the borders open to the world. The most dangerous political activism, political organization and social criticism against the regime are closely linked to the highly educated young urban population.

However, this approach, which undermines citizens' skills and changing needs, does not provide a permanent solution to the Kremlin's reluctance to renew its lost social contract with the educated urban youth. If the Kremlin wants to keep the borders open to the West, it should reassess the influences emanating from there rather than simply opposing them, or allowing skilled citizens to leave. With the current developments, innovations and technological breakthroughs echoing hollowly in the Kremlin, speeches will remain speeches.