

Re-immigrants to Russia: New Cultural Values and Skills of Self-Fashioning

Alexander Kourylev Department of Political Sciences and Sociology European University at St. Petersburg St. Petersburg, Russia

Abstract of Presentation

This paper presents results of a sociological study of Russian re-immigrants from Western developed countries; re-immigrants are defined here as people who decided to return to Russia after a number of years spent in emigration and now pursue their activities in their home countries.

Max Weber's sociology serves as a theoretical starting point for this research. In his famous work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Weber described an affinity between the "capitalist spirit" and the Protestant ethic as expressed in economic behavior (Weber 1992). Weber's powerful analysis of psycho-religious and cultural motivations was amended by Werner Sombart's theory of migration (Sombart 1913). In his research on the results of mass migration during the Puritan Reformation, Sombart put the famous Weberian explanation into question. Since he found that a major group of successful Protestants during the Reformation were former migrants, Sombart came to the conclusion that migrants adhered to the "capitalist spirit" better than native inhabitants. As a rule, a migrant did not view cultural and religious restrictions in a foreign country in the way that a native inhabitant did. I would like to suggest that similarly, a Russian re-immigrant--one who has returned to his native culture after years of absence--finds himself in a status very close to that of a foreigner. In a sense, the re-immigrant sees his or her own native culture a new way, while the environment also treats him or her in a way different from before. This "doubly dislocated" status makes re-immigrants very interesting for a study of cultural values if we extend Sombart's hypothesis to cover them as well. Following fundamental political and economic transformations taking place in Eastern Europe during the decade of 1989-1999, and as a result of opening the state's borders, representatives of various emigre strata have returned back to Russia.

In this paper I am trying to argue that re-immigrants from the western developed countries play the role of proponents of new cultural values and practices during the days of political and economic transformations in Russia. It seems that the emigration experiences in Western developed countries, as well as resources and socio-economic positions available in the home society, determine the level of re-immigrants' innovative activities after their return.

Re-immigrants to Russia

The materials, taken from 22 informal interviews with Russian re-immigrants, serve as the main empirical basis of the research. The informal interviews were conducted in the form of "guided conversation."

As it turned out, spontaneous statements of re-immigrants about learning "a new style of life" were most interesting. Most re-immigrants spoke about the skills they learned during the period of emigration, and outlined skills that they would like to teach their countrymen in Russia. (It is very important to stress that re-immigrants' statements on "learning" have not been inspired by the interviewer.) These re-immigrants' statements also suggested another finding, a by-product of research that has unexpectedly appeared during the interviews: most re-immigrants claimed that during emigration they have learned not only new professional skills, but have also learned how to change and transform themselves. These statements concerned what may be called "practices of self-fashioning." The practices of self-fashioning among Russian re-immigrants are very similar to the religious practices "self-making" shared by Protestants during Puritan Reformation, which were described by Weber in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" as constitutive of the individualistic moral basis of western capitalism.

References

- Inglehart, Ronald 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Sombart, Werner. 1913. "Der Bourgeois: the Quintessence of Capitalism. "
- Spinosa, Charles; Flores, Fernando; Dreyfus, Hubert. 1997. *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press.
- Weber, Max. 1992. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Transl. Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge.