Natalya Kravets / Victor Voronkov

Repatriation of Russian Citizens from Lithuania

The Experience of Compact Resettlement

Repatriation of Russian Citizens from Lithuania

The case study by Natalya Kravets and Victor Voronkov, director of the Centre of Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg, describes the process and problems of repatriation of the Russian speaking population living in Mazheikiai, Lithuania, to the village of Vsevolozhsk in Russia. For the most part such repatriations have not been very successful for various reasons but in the case studied by the authors, due to the engagement of a self-help group called the "Committee for Resettling Citizens", some problems in the process were avoided. The authors report first on the establishment of a Russian speaking community in Mazeikiai and the reasons why they decided to leave after 1989. Then the different problems which arose during the process of planning and organizing the resettlement are analysed. In this context the authors focus on the work of the "Committee for Resettling Citizens" and especially its strategies to overcome the problems of housing and work faced by the majority of the repa-
The following section recounts the problems of adapting to a new life in Russia and the repatriates’ opinions about their new living conditions. Here the authors come to the conclusion that those resettlers who already have friends or relatives in Russia adapt more easily to the new situation due to the support they receive from them. Finally the authors look into the question of whether those Russian speaking persons who are still in Lithuania will leave or stay.

**Die Repatriierung russischer Bürger aus Litauen**


*******

**Repatriation of Russian Citizens from Lithuania**

**Introduction**

The compact resettlement of the Russian-speaking population from the new independent states that once were a part of the Soviet Union has for the most part not been a success. There have only been a few cases in which migrants coming from one and the same community managed to settle together, maintaining the once established network of mutual support. The reasons for this failure are well known: specific features of the current migration policy (different from the one proclaimed!) pursued by Russia, a discrepant and contradictory legal space, the indifference to the interests of migrants shown by the local authorities and the hostility displayed by the indigenous population, and – the key point – the absence of any financing. The last-mentioned reason is crushing even for the best resettlement schemes; promises of credits and support cannot be fulfilled, and migrants spread all over the country in search of new individual survival strategies.

**The case of Mazeikiai**

**Establishment of a Russian speaking community in Mazeikiai (1970-1989)**

We present here the results of a case study which was conducted on the basis of an uncommon event: a self-help group from one of the plants in Lithuania has overcome numerous obstacles and reached its goals by creating a compact settlement on the territory of Leningrad Oblast.

In the middle of the seventies the Lithuanian town of Mazeikiai was selected to be the place for a new oil-refining plant. Earlier, before this major construction project started, Mazeikiai had been a typical Lithuanian regional centre with a population of 30,000, the absolute majority of them being Lithuanians. There were three Lithuanian schools, a Polish Roman-Catholic church and some small industries – a footwear producing factory, an electrical engineering plant and a compressor producing plant.
With the construction of the largest oil refinery in the Baltic region (which started to operate in 1979) the social situation in the town changed drastically. Although the plant was located in Lithuania, its management had to report to the Ministry in Moscow. As there were neither oil-processing experts available, nor a large enough work force in the town, the administration of the plant started to recruit people from other regions of the USSR, mainly from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. By the end of the eighties Mazeikiai already had become the home of hundreds of Russian-speaking families. By the beginning of the nineties the resident population in Mazeikiai reached 46,000, seven per cent of them being Russians.

Parallel with the construction of the new plant, a new housing estate was developed. The flats were provided mostly for the plant’s employees, the overwhelming majority of whom were migrants. In this residential area, apart from housing blocks, some other buildings necessary for living and for spending spare time were constructed, among them a new Russian school. The majority of the Russian-speaking specialists and members of their families worked at the plant or at other facilities developed together with the plant and closely linked to it. Thus a “Russian-speaking colony” emerged which was characterized by solidarity resulting from the common interests they had in the plant and from living close together. This Russian speaking community was practically isolated from the Lithuanian majority (reminiscent of a ghetto), as it had no links to the interests of the indigenous population.

Little by little the interests of the plant and its employees started to determine urban development patterns, as all major investments in the urban infrastructure were made by the plant. The Russian language was more and more often heard in populated areas in Mazeikiai, displacing Lithuanian, and in the area populated by the plant’s employees it prevailed absolutely. The migrants never had any real need to study the Lithuanian language.

The response of the indigenous population to the ousting of the Lithuanian language and traditional culture started to become apparent in 1987-1988. With the reforms being carried out in the former Soviet Union, the society became more and more open, and some of the Lithuanians started to harbour nationalist views. Hostile feelings towards migrants became more

and more visible. The words “invaders”, “migrants” and “colonizers”, became current. In shops and medical and other institutions more and more exhortations to speak Lithuanian were heard.

Plans for and problems of leaving Lithuania

In 1989 the law “On the Official Language in the Republic of Lithuania” was adopted in which Lithuanian was declared the only official language in Lithuania. By this time it had become clear that Lithuania would inevitably secede from the Soviet Union. The Party leadership in Mazeikiai as well as the local authorities were all Lithuanian nationals. Therefore the hostility towards the Russian-speaking migrants was not opposed “from above.” Practically the whole Russian-speaking population in Mazeikiai was seized with anxiety and even panic.

Among the “Russian-speaking population”, which was made up of different nationalities – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Tartars, Uzbeks, Azerbajianis, Jews, Moldovans etc. – the idea of leaving Lithuania started to develop. The living conditions in Russia as well as the growing instability in Russia were by no means pull factors. But the fear of the unknown, of becoming a “second-rate” person in Lithuania, the concentration of manifestations of hostility towards the Russians, anticipation of ethnic discrimination and the loss of orientation became powerful push factors. All these factors were urging people to make their choice in favour of migration strategies.

Managers of the plant subdivisions and highly-skilled specialists, using connections they had in ministries and regional Party organizations, found positions in Russia – in similar industries and in newly built plants – where they could count on getting flats. On the other hand, those who did not have sufficient cultural and social capital to take similar chances, started to feel a fear of the future that was gradually turning into panic. Many people found employment at big Russian construction sites (for instance, at the construction of the St. Petersburg dike) where there was a chance to be provided with housing.

Migration 29/30/31
The management of the oil refinery, which by that time consisted almost solely of Lithuanians, was worried by the outflow of skilled manpower. In order to stop the outflow the plant provided for Lithuanian language courses for the Russian speaking population. At the same time, on various pretexts, all possible kinds of obstacles were put in the way of those who wanted to move.

It should be mentioned that it was not easy for potential migrants to exchange their flats with residents of Russian towns who wished to move to Lithuania. As there was no housing market at all in the USSR (to sell one's flat in one place and to buy another one somewhere else was not possible), the only way out was a direct swap of housing. Apart from the ever tougher legal restrictions applied to such a swap, there was another very complicated problem: finding a potential partner for the swap in Russia. Additional complications appeared also due to the fact that potential migrants wished to move to towns in Central Russia, but those who wanted to come back to Lithuania were mostly ethnic Lithuanians whose relatives were once subjected to repression, who for the most part were living in the former places of exile (Siberia or the North).

At this moment the Russian-speaking community split into two parts. The first decided to cast its lot with Lithuania. The others could not imagine themselves living outside of Russia and were afraid to find themselves in "emigration." After the "Law on Citizenship" was adopted, the last hopes of leaving the republic by the way of exchanging flats vanished.

Emergence of the "Committee of Resettling Citizens" and the beginning of its work

In 1990 in Mazeikiai a popular movement emerged that was formed by citizens who wished to return to their native land. Everybody who was not able to find an individual solution to this problem recognized the necessity to develop a group strategy. The movement was headed by a leading group called the "Committee of Resettling Citizens" that consisted of several people working at the plant. It should be mentioned that at this time any practical experience in self-help group activities was lacking completely in the USSR, as there were no legal provisions for such actions.

Repatriation of Russian Citizens from Lithuania

The newly organized group had to gain experience on its own, step by step, from its immediate activities.

After the list of those willing to go back to Russia (some 300 households) had been compiled, the activities proceeded in two ways: First of all, they had to establish links with Moscow and apply to the First Congress of People's Deputies of Russia. Second, they had to seek the support of some Lithuanian politicians and to apply to the Prime Minister.

The future settlers applied to a number of bodies in the USSR – Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Petrochemical Industry, Central Committee of Trade Unions, Council of Ministers of the USSR – but none of them was willing to get involved in this matter. One of the high-ranking officials in Moscow put it bluntly: "There are no refugees in the USSR, nor will there be any in the future." And as there was "no" subject for discussion, the refusal to be involved looked quite natural.

As for the Lithuanian side, it did not refuse to consider the issue of organized resettlement, but nevertheless it saw this problem as dependent on its relations with the Soviet Union. At that time those relations were rather tense. Responding to the Committee's request of June 15th 1990, Lithuanian Prime Minister K. Prunskene wrote: "We accept ... the proposal to create a conciliatory commission that will deal with resettlement issues; at the same time, we propose to postpone a concrete solution till the time when the blockade is lifted and the Lithuanian Republic enters into negotiations with the Soviet Union ..."

Decision to settle in Vsevolozhsk

Changes in the balance of political forces in Moscow, as well as certain actions taken by the resettlement committee, resulted in direct involvement of the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation. A task force was launched for negotiating resettlement issues with Lithuania. The town Vsevolozhsk in the Leningrad Oblast was chosen as a probable location for the future compact settlement.
At this time a branch of the Leningrad plant “Russkii dizel” (“Russian Diesel”) was being built in the Vsevolozhsk region. Following an established Soviet practice, those who came to Vsevolozhsk to work in the newly built plant were registered in waiting lists for housing; the prospects for getting accommodation were quite distant, though. Gradually the basic strategy of the “Committee of Resettling Citizens” was taking shape: to provide jobs at the new plant for migrants from Mazeikiai and to strive for the decision to build new housing for them in Vsevolozhsk at Lithuanian expense. A similar decision was taken also by the Supreme Council of Russia.

At first this idea was opposed by the local authorities under the pretext that housing problems were acute in Vsevolozhsk, and that even “our own residents” (as they were called by the local authorities) from the waiting lists can’t get accommodation (it was the first time that these words were pronounced: “our own residents” on one side and “aliens” on the other). But then, after the “Committee of Resettling Citizens” promised to transfer 20 per cent of the newly built apartments to the local authorities free of charge so that they could be offered to the “our own residents” from the waiting lists, and after pressure was put on the local power bodies by the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation and by local authorities of the Leningrad Oblast, a land allocation decision was taken and a building permit was issued.

In order to compensate for the increased load on the local social infrastructure caused by the flow of several hundred migrants into the town, Lithuanian developers were obliged to build a nursery for 200 children free of charge. The position taken by the management of the plant “Russkii dizel” was “neutral”, though it did not show any interest in employing specialists already provided with “apartments”, it did not object to employing the migrants in its new branch.

After preliminary negotiations between the Russian and Lithuanian sides took place in June 1991, a meeting of a non-governmental working group was held where an agreement between the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and the Government of the Lithuanian Republic was signed: “On assistance to citizens invited to work in Mazeikiai, Lithuanian Republic, aimed at helping them to resettle in the Vsevolozhsk region of the Leningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation.” This agreement covered almost all issues related to the resettlement. It was decided that the houses for migrants would be build by Lithuanian builders from Lithuanian materials. The building work was to be funded by the Lithuanian Republic. The same agreement stated that those migrating from Lithuania would transfer ownership of their apartments to the Lithuanian authorities.

Nevertheless, it was decided to provide housing not for all households, but only for those migrants who had arrived in Mazeikiai in an organized way – on invitation, on job assignment etc. Thus everybody who had arrived to Mazeikiai on their own initiative lost the chance to move to Vsevolozhsk. As a result, by the time of its approval the list of 300 households wishing to resettle in Russia consisted only of 132 households (this was the first split in the group of resettlers united by mutual troubles and mutual hopes).

The process of building houses for repatriates in Vsevolozhsk

In 1992 a planning institution in Vilnius performed a survey on the building site and prepared a building plan. Lithuanian developers went to Vsevolozhsk and drove piles for the foundations of future buildings. At that stage the process was suspended, as in 1993 Lithuania practically stopped all funding for the construction works because of the tough economic situation in the republic. Only after one year did Lithuania resume financing under pressure exerted by the Russian Federation.

By this time, under legislation in force in Russia, many imported goods were subject to customs duty. The list of goods included concrete panels and blocks, decoration materials, construction engineering – i.e. everything needed for construction. Lithuania refused to pay the customs duty. The whole resettlement process was jeopardized again.

The Committee for Resettling Citizens, acting through the Russian Federal Migration Service, appealed to the Committee on International Humanitarian and Technical Aid and to the State Customs Committee of the Russian Federation to classify building materials, equipment and construction engi-
neering as humanitarian aid. This would exempt them from customs, VAT and special taxes for the whole period of the building process. By July 1994 a positive solution to this problem was achieved and the construction of the first five-storey block started. In July 1995 the first block was accepted by the state commission and declared ready for tenancy.

This was the time when the organization of re-settlers was split for the second time. The Lithuanian side raised the question of the difference in total floor space between the apartments left in Mazeikiai by the emigrants and those received in Russia. This problem emerged due to the fact that the newly built blocks were of better quality and the flats were bigger, as several dozen households had received apartments corresponding to the Russian Federation standards at the time. The Lithuanian side wanted to get some reimbursement from Russia. The Russian state bodies refused to cover this difference and thus the re-settlers were asked to cover it themselves.

The Lithuanian side offered the following solution: redistribute the new flats in such a way that the total floor space of housing left in Mazeikiai by the repatriates would be equal to the floor space received in Vsevolozhsk. This meant that the “surplus” floor space in Vsevolozhsk had to be confiscated from some households and transferred to others. Those who would gain from it and thus increase their floor space of course were satisfied, but those who would lose a room or even two rooms were strongly opposed. Later the Lithuanian side withdrew these requirements, but the group of resettlers was already split. When the time came to move to Russia the “community” of resettlers actually did not exist any more.

Adaptation in Vsevolozhsk

Problems of the repatriates in Vsevolozhsk

The first resettlers came to Vsevolozhsk at the beginning of September. The “Russkii dizel” plant that many of them had seen as their potential employer was about to declare bankruptcy. Many of them were unable to find a job in St. Petersburg. One of the possible reasons was a lack of information about the local labour market. The newcomers did not have any friends or acquaintances in the new location, and hence could not get reliable information about potential jobs. As a result they were often employed by companies that did not fulfil their obligations, which is not rare in Russia today. Many people were deceived; living standards declined sharply.

An unexpected problem was waiting for the resettlers at the labour exchange, where the majority of those seeking for jobs applied. It appeared that one could be registered at the labour exchange only six months after acquiring the right of permanent residence, though this was contrary to the obligations assumed by the Russian side to provide jobs for the resettlers. Moreover the resettlers from Mazeikiai found themselves in a legal vacuum, as the “Law on forced resettlers” which was approved after the signature of the “Agreement” did not apply to them.

Under these circumstances another attempt was made to protect the rights of resettlers as a group: 14 resettlers addressed a letter to the Migration Committee of the Leningrad Oblast Government asking for justice to be restored in their relations with the labour exchange. Three months afterwards a Decree of the President of the Russian Federation was issued that settled this issue. Therefore when the time came to occupy the second block of flats, the problem had been resolved. At the same time there were many other problems that could not be settled.

Those resettlers who had relatives or acquaintances able to support them in the new place had an advantage over those who had not. Many resettlers had relatives and acquaintances in Vsevolozhsk among those who had come there earlier on their own initiative. With their help some of the new resettlers were able to find jobs. The existence of supporters in the new community greatly advanced their quick adaptation in the new environment.

Opinions on the new life in Vsevolozhsk

The attitude of resettlers towards the very fact of resettlement was formed under the strong influence of these problems. A single mother who does
not have any employment, who sits at home taking care of her seven year old child and who survives on a benefit and some former "Lithuanian" savings expressed the following opinion: "I joined the list as I was afraid that as I did not know the language I might lose my job. But when we arrived here - no jobs, nothing to do... In Lithuania there were relatives, somewhere to go to. If I could have a job I could get accustomed to everything - to the dirt, to the disorder. It is good that the school is perfect, the city (St. Petersburg) is very close, there is everything needed in the shops, but you need money... Everybody speaks Russian - it is relaxing, people are kind-hearted. True, in the administration it is terrible, the officials are rude, they behave boorishly. In Lithuania it is different. But on the other hand, for a child everything is open: dancing groups, art school - really everything. And all of us feel the same: all depend on employment. Those who get it feel good, they are satisfied. And those who did not keep remembering Lithuania."

A girl who came to Vsevolozhsk with her father explained: "Here in Vsevolozhsk I found a job at once, though the salary is small, but I have an opportunity to get an education [she is an external student]. Father is dissatisfied, salaries are not paid, pensions are delayed. But he puts up with it for my sake. And I feel here emotionally and morally better than in Lithuania, though our living standard has decreased considerably. If the salaries were paid in time, we would live here not worse than in Mazeikiai."

The attitude of residents of Vsevolozhsk towards resettlers was benevolent and sympathetic from the very beginning (which is not at all characteristic for Russia as a whole - more often the indigenous population displays hostility towards migrants). Nevertheless, many migrants mention a negative attitude shown towards them by the local administration. At the labour exchange a particular dissatisfaction was caused by papers certifying that a certain number of the migrants received high salaries in Lithuania; this meant theoretically that they qualified for high unemployment benefits in Russia. Then the phrase was pronounced: "There is no money to pay for our own unemployed, and now that you are also here..."

The sentiments of many resettlers underwent changes. The lofty patriotic statements pronounced in Lithuania, "we need to raise Russia from its current state" or "one has to go to Russia and work there by the sweat of one's brow" gave place to dissatisfaction which people tried to justify in some way: "However bad it may be, it is ours", "we have moved already, so what shall we do now", "tough as it is, I am glad that I came here anyway", "what's the use of regretting now - we have moved, so we have to settle down here", "these are tough times for everybody in Russia, so let us endure them together."

When the delay in paying unemployment Benefits reached five months, a considerable number of the resettlers went to seek jobs in the shadow industries, regarding their unemployment benefits as additional revenue. Many women were employed by owners of private stalls as sellers. As for men, their search for jobs took on rather diverse shapes. For instance, some of them formed a group and launched a car selling business. They imported cars from abroad using the connections they had in Lithuania. Four migrants were employed by the Lithuanian building company that was about to complete the last blocks of flats under the above-mentioned "Agreement." Somebody used his personal connections to get a job in a well-established company and got a good salary that is paid without any delay.

But for the majority of the migrants the employment problem remains the most crucial one. One of the women resettlers said: "In Lithuania we lived a good life, everybody knew my husband as a highly skilled professional, here nobody knows him, and he can't find a job. We only came here for our son's sake, he studies at an institute."

Attempting to find the best survival strategies under these tough conditions, almost all migrant households have rented plots of land to use as family gardens. "Community-oriented" trends started to appear again as it was necessary to guard the family gardens jointly against thieves, to pick berries and mushrooms jointly etc. When a year passed after the departure from Mazeikiai, the phrase "when we were back home in Lithuania" almost disappeared from the lips of the resettlers. Their problems almost ceased to differ from those faced by the other residents of Vsevolozhsk.
To move or to stay?

Soon the last group of resettlers will come to Russia. In recent years the social and economic situation in Lithuania has changed dramatically. The attitudes of former migrants from Russia have also changed. Many things have become clear, fears have disappeared, the problem of ethnic discrimination appears rather far-fetched. What is more, it has become clear that living standards in Lithuania are higher than in Russia, the situation is more stable and conditions are more favourable. Therefore many people who dreamt of leaving Lithuania some time ago have not yet made their ultimate choice – to move or to stay.

One of those who are still hesitant – a woman working as a designer in the plant and mother of two children – says: “My parents and my sister are living in St. Petersburg, the parents of my husband in Mazeikiai. Of course I would prefer to stay closer to mother, but there is no job there, and it’s so dirty everywhere. The children do not want to [go]. Why choose something that is worse?” The others are not rejecting the resettlement idea in principle, but they delay their departure in order to earn more money in Lithuania.

Among those who were registered for resettlement were people who made their careers during the time that passed after the signature of the “Agreement.” They have become successful entrepreneurs in the meantime. These people have long ago forgotten the idea of moving to Russia, and now they can’t imagine living outside of Lithuania. This is what was said by one of the women who was visiting her old friends from Mazeikiai in Vsevolozhsk: “I am glad that I took my name off the list. Where did you get? In Lithuania there are jobs, order, things have sorted themselves out, and in Russia there is the dirt ...” Her children graduated from colleges in Lithuania, she launched her own business and though she can’t speak fluent Lithuanian, she is not going to leave Lithuania. On the other side, there are also others, those who are currently earning good money in Lithuania and hope to come back to their native land some time in the future.

Among those “Russian speakers” who remained in Lithuania one should first of all mention the people working for companies that run joint businesses with raw materials operators in Russia; these are businessmen or oil refinery employees occupying high-level positions and speaking good
