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Putin's Eye for Power Leads Some in Russia to Ponder Life Abroad

By SETH MYDANS

MOSCOW — “Time to shove off” is the name of a [Web site](#) for people who are fed up with life in [Russia](#), and it is becoming a catchphrase for those dismayed by the [newly announced plans of Vladimir V. Putin](#) to keep a grip on power for perhaps two more terms as president.

“A year ago I told all my friends who were leaving that I would never do that, no way!” wrote a magazine editor named Yevgeniya Lobacheva in a posting on another Web site. “But I have only one life. Twelve years! I will be 43!”

Mr. Putin has already been in power for 12 years — the first eight as president, the past four as a prime minister with de facto executive power. Now, the prospect of what many Russians are already calling a “period of stagnation” has set off a new wave of declarations of nonallegiance to a nation where corruption and an inflexible top-down system are squeezing off options for change and personal advancement.

“I want to live in a country where I don’t need to break the rules to live in comfort,” said Stepan Chizhov, 29, who markets board games like Monopoly and is preparing to leave for Canada with his wife next summer.

“I just don’t want to have to fight the system,” Mr. Chizhov said. “I want the system to be a comfort to me. I want to live easily. And there’s no possibility in Russia in the next 20 years to follow the laws, follow the rules and live in comfort.”

Lev D. Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, a polling agency, said that about 50,000 people leave Russia every year and that this number could grow by 10,000 or 15,000 in the future.

“There will be a dark and depressive mood in society,” Mr. Gudkov said. “The situation is uncertain, there is a growth of anxiety, a feeling of stagnation and degradation.”

Some analysts are already calling this the sixth wave of Russian emigration — the first began in 1917 after the Bolshevik Revolution, and the most recent is considered to be the post-Soviet departures of the early 1990s.

In defining this sixth wave, Dmitri Oreshkin, a political scientist, said in an [often-quoted article](#) this year: “It’s basically just those who in the 1990s, because of their youth and innate optimism, believed that freedom would finally come and Russia would become a normal country. The Putin decade sobered them up.”

Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, many in the educated middle class, who had hoped to be part of a maturing, modernizing society, feel themselves instead being tugged backward.

“This past haunts us,” said Andrei Zolotov Jr., deputy director of the international service of the RIA Novosti news agency, “this fear: what if they close the borders? That is one of the fears in the background.”

Indeed, it may be Russia’s history of emigration that gives rise to an ingrained emotional response to adversity: time to shove off.

Most people who say this do not really mean it, said Ilya Klishin, 24, a blogger and journalist, calling their remarks “depression multiplied by fatalism and driven to the absurd.”

In a [blog post](#) titled, “I will not leave,” he wrote: “How can I surrender my country to insane ghouls and watch from a safe distance as it dies?”

The departures are particularly damaging because they are sapping Russia of its most qualified people, experts say. Those who leave are three times more likely to have higher education than those who stay, Mr. Oreshkin said.

President Dmitri A. Medvedev, who is expected to swap places with Mr. Putin as prime minister after an election in March, has complained repeatedly about a brain drain and has said, without offering specifics, that the government should create “favorable conditions” for scientists and others to remain.

In addition, Mr. Oreshkin said, “it is money that is emigrating,” as entrepreneurs hedge their bets on the future and take advantage of the transparency of business operations in the West.

In fact, the so-called sixth wave may be harder to quantify than previous emigrations because Russia's open borders now allow people to leave without leaving — to own homes or spend parts of the year abroad and to send their children to school overseas with the option of returning or staying away. In traumatic departures during Soviet times, goodbye often meant forever.

“If the situation will become really better, we leave ourselves the opportunity to return back to Russia,” said Mr. Chizhov, who plans to study computer science and business administration in Canada. “But I don't think it will happen.”

Russian enclaves have developed not only in capitals like London and New York, but in places like southern France, Montenegro, Cyprus and Thailand, often with Russian-language street signs and radio stations.

At the same time, not all who stay in Russia are wholeheartedly here, many of them engaging in something that has been labeled internal emigration.

“There is the feeling of not fitting into the system, a sense of alienation that nothing really depends on you, that you don't matter,” Mr. Zolotov said, “and that results in what is called internal emigration. You stop watching television, you retreat into your private life, you disconnect from the country around you.”

Some take this one step further into “xenopatriotism” in which, according to newspaper descriptions here, people connect themselves with other nations or cultures — Japanese, English, Scottish, Catalanian — and learn the history, the language and the folkways of this new imagined homeland.

Valeria Korchagina, 40, a journalist, is one person who made a real-world departure, although she says she never intended to, even as her disappointments and disillusionment grew over the past decade.

“It probably would have gone on forever,” she wrote in an e-mail from her new home in Brussels. “But on July 6, 2009, my twin girls were born, and that changed it all.”

“Seeing the place now being way too unjust and unsafe in every sense of it,” she wrote, “and most importantly losing hope that anything would improve any time soon, I realized that I don't want my children to have anything to do with the place.”

She said she was grateful to be part of a middle class that has the option of leaving, rather than having to struggle on with the hardships she perceived here.

“I honestly cannot say for how long we are gone,” she wrote. “We will sure visit the place. My parents and grandparents are still there. But whether I want to return to live there any time soon, probably not.”