Generations and Motivations: Russian and other Former Soviet Immigrants in Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the role that social networks have played in the migration and settlement of Russian and other former Soviet immigrants to Costa Rica. This group of immigrants is of particular interest in that it is an example of migration from a former communist nation to a Third World country, not to the first world (Europe or the United States). Furthermore, a group of Soviet women who married Costa Rican men beginning in the late 1970s set this migration in motion. The objective of our research was to examine the structure and meaning of these immigrants’ social networks, and the role that they play in the migration process and during settlement. The findings suggest there is a significant difference in the form and function of the social networks of those immigrants who arrived prior to 1991 (during the Soviet era), and those who came post-1991 and following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

INTRODUCTION

Migration between Russia and Costa Rica represents a small, but interesting international flow. Modern migration began as Soviet women married Costa Rican men who were in the USSR for their educations. A second wave of migration – one much more diverse – followed the collapse of the Soviet system. In this paper, we examine the differences that define these two flows. We use our data to critique traditional models of migration, and particularly, the
assumed centrality of migrant networks. After briefly reviewing network theory in migration studies, we present our data and discussion of Russia-Costa Rica movement.

COSTA RICA AND IMMIGRATION

Costa Rica has a long history of immigration. Large populations of Chinese, Lebanese, and West Indians arrived in Costa Rica beginning in the late nineteenth century. Strategically situated in Central America, the country has had no army since 1949. Not having suffered the armed conflict of its neighbours in the 1980s, it has earned a worldwide reputation for being peaceful. Furthermore, its relative economic stability, and superior levels of education and health care have made it an attractive place for many refugees and immigrants, including Argentinians and Chileans in the 1970s, and Nicaraguans and Salvadorans in the 1980s. Recently, large numbers of Colombians and Taiwanese have entered the country, and the migrant flows have become increasingly diverse. According to the 2000 Census, the total Costa Rican foreign-born population for 2000 was 296,461 (7.78% of total population). Currently, the largest immigrant groups are Nicaraguans, who constitute 5.94 per cent of the total population. The next four largest groups are Panamanians, US citizens, Salvadorans, and Colombians, although their numbers are much smaller than those of Nicaraguans (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of total migrant population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>226,374</td>
<td>76.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>10,270</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9,511</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>8,714</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>5,898</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>296,461</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Costa Rica is sometimes used as a “bridge” to gain entrance to the United States. Once an immigrant attains Costa Rican residence or citizenship, it is easier to obtain legal entrance to the United States. This is common among Cubans, as
many baseball players have sought refugee status in Costa Rica as a first step to entering the United States where they become free agents instead of being drafted. The most famous case is that of New York Yankees pitcher Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez (Villalobos, 2000). Hernandez was granted refugee status in Costa Rica and soon migrated to the United States. His case made news headlines as many Costa Ricans complained that once famous, he would “forget about Costa Rica”.

The influx of Soviet migrants began in the late 1970s and remained steady during the 1980s. Most of these immigrants were spouses of Costa Rican students who obtained advanced degrees in the Soviet Union. Their studies were funded by scholarships from the Soviet Government, and they required that the students return home upon completion of their degrees. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a second wave of Russians and citizens of former Soviet Republics migrated to Costa Rica. The 2000 Costa Rican Census notes that currently there are just more than 600 immigrants born in Russia or one of the former Soviet republics – a small group, but one that, given the nature of the Soviet system and its collapse, allows us to investigate the motivations and social nature of migration.1

**METHODS**

The data come from fieldwork conducted by the first author between June and August of 2003. During that time, she carried out an ethnosurvey to collect demographic markers, data on socio-economic status, migration and labour history, and indicators of assimilation (such as language use and participation in social organizations). An ethnosurvey allows the collection of life history data, and is particularly useful in documenting the circularity of much of the current international migration (Massey, 1987).

The respondents were found using a modified snowball sampling technique, where several individuals acted as the index. While this may not be the most appropriate technique for obtaining a varied sample of the Russian population, snowball sampling was necessary for this is not a highly visible population. An effort was made to collect as diverse a sample as possible, with respect to age, sex, period of migration, and social class.

Once interviewed, an informant was asked to give the names and phone numbers or addresses of other Russian immigrants they knew. This technique proved very successful, and we received many phone numbers, always with an extra comment such as “he is very nice, he’ll talk a lot”, or “don’t tell her that it was
me who gave you her number”. Informants were generally more reluctant to give out the phone numbers of more recent immigrants, claiming that their Spanish language skills were not good and that they would probably not want to be interviewed. This made it difficult to find more recently arrived informants. Recent immigrants were found by chance, meeting them in a Russian restaurant or through Costa Rican informants who told me about a Russian store they saw, or a Russian neighbour. Once contacted, informants were usually willing to participate. The only two rejections received were from a woman who was leaving the country soon, and another one who was pregnant and due to give birth soon.

Besides answering the structured survey questions, informants often provided more information than was asked of them, such as their opinion of Costa Rican society, the reception they obtained from their husbands’ families or from society in general. These comments were written in the survey form and considered in the analysis.

The ethnosurvey also requested information about the other members of the household (defined as children living outside the home, or anyone living in it), and any other relative living in Costa Rica (including partner’s relatives, whether Russian or Costa Rican). The survey includes 23 household heads. In total, we obtained information on 60 immigrants, constituting approximately 10 per cent of the total reported Russian population in Costa Rica (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Number in CR</th>
<th>Households surveyed</th>
<th>Number of people represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of reported immigrants in the 2000 Census from each of the former Soviet republics does not match precisely the data gathered through the ethnosurvey. For example, the Census reports one person born in Uzbekistan, while we interviewed three different Uzbek households with a total of eight members, all of whom were in Costa Rica prior to the Census. One possible explanation for this is that immigrants from the lesser-known republics reported themselves as “Russians” – this is particularly likely due to the way in which the Costa Rican Census is carried out. Personnel (usually local teachers) conduct the Census house to house, and if a reply of “Uzbekistan” is met with a perplexed look, an informant might simply claim to be Russian. Another explanation might be that there is an underreporting of Russian immigrants due to illegal status, but this has not yet been explored.

DATA

Our sample consisted of 23 household heads, seven men and 16 women, ranging in age from 17 to 62. Their educational level is very high, with 82.6 per cent having at least a college education. Most of those interviewed are Russian-born (61%), and the rest are from Ukraine (17%), Uzbekistan (13%), Kazakhstan (4%), and Belarus (4%).

We divided the respondents into two groups: those who arrived prior to 1991 (during the Soviet era), and those who arrived in 1991 or later (following the collapse of the Soviet Union).

While being interviewed, many informants referred to “the old ones” or “the new ones” when talking about the Russian community in Costa Rica. The “old ones” were those immigrants who arrived as Soviets, and the “new ones” arrived in Costa Rica as Russians – or the citizens of a former Soviet republic. We discovered this reference when informants were asked to give referrals to other possible respondents (“I don’t know too many of the new ones”) and when informants discussed community cohesion (“the old ones are too old-fashioned”). Once separated into the two groups, many differences become evident. Outcomes do not appear to relate to educational level, age, or gender (although nearly all pre-1991 immigrants were women), but instead had to do with the immigrant’s time of arrival. Fifteen households fell into the “pre-1991” category (two men and 13 women) and eight in the “1991 and later” group (five men and three women).

The basic socio-demographic characteristics are similar for each group. The pre-1991 generation has a higher rate of divorce (42.9% versus 33%), for which the informants had varying explanations. All of the pre-1991 women sampled were married to Costa Rican men. Several mentioned cultural differences as the
reason for their divorces and the relatively high divorce rate for their subgroup. Among the explanations given were that Costa Rican men are “womanizers” and that they cheated on them, or that they had alcoholic husbands. Someone mentioned that Russian women are “difficult” and that Costa Rican men are “mansos” (docile). One of the Russian women still married to a Costa Rican argued that divorced Russian women make generalizations about Costa Ricans, and that they believe in the superiority of Russian culture. What became clear is that none of the divorced women regretted the divorce. They all claimed to be happy that they did it – one even said that although she is divorced, she likes to think of her ex-husband as being dead.

Other socio-demographic characteristics are uniform across both groups, with educational levels being high (a mean of 16.13 and 14.75 years of education) and no major religious affiliations (see Table 3). The major differences evident between the pre-1991 group and the post-1991 group are with respect to their migration experience and employment characteristics, which are closely related to their social networks.

| Table 3 |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Table 3: Socio-demographic Characteristics by Group |
| Marital status (divorced) | 16 years | 14.75 years |
| Religious affiliation | 43% | 33% |
| Employment (professionals) | none | none |
| Education Level | 80% | 37.5% |

Practically all (93.3%) of the pre-1991 informants migrated to Costa Rica because they had married Costa Ricans who had scholarships to study in the Soviet Union. Most expressed the desire to remain in the Soviet Union, but the conditions of the scholarship demanded that the students return to their country of origin. Some of the female respondents were adamant about making it clear that they married for love – they all mention only one case of a Russian woman who married a Costa Rican student because she wanted to exit the Soviet Union.

The post-1991 group gave mixed reasons for deciding to move, including one informant who claimed to have seen a tourism advertisement for Costa Rica on television, and decided to move. Others mentioned problems in owning businesses in Russia given the influence of the mafia. Most immigrants claimed they immigrated for economic reasons. None was married to a Costa Rican at the time of migration.
Just more than 13 per cent of the pre-1991 informants had a relative migrate to Costa Rica after them, usually a parent. None, however, had any relatives in Costa Rica prior to moving, save for their spouse’s families. Of the new generation, 37.5 per cent had family members in Costa Rica. Many of the respondents who chose Costa Rica but did not have family there mentioned that originally they wanted to move to the United States. However, it was typically difficult to obtain a visa, so they chose Costa Rica instead, given its reputation as a peaceful country. Although none mentioned that they wished to move to the United States after obtaining Costa Rican citizenship, some did mention relatives who originally settled in Costa Rica and had left for the United States, which is consistent with the phenomenon of Costa Rica as a bridge.

The pre-1991 generation of immigrants arrived under very particular settings because they came with Costa Rican husbands. Their initial support base consisted of their husbands’ Costa Rican families. Because of this, 93.3 per cent stated that they stayed with “relatives” during their initial years in Costa Rica. By contrast, only 25 per cent of the new generation made that claim, another 25 per cent stayed with friends and half rented residences independently.

The average age at migration for the first generation was 27 years. These migrants came as members of young, recently formed families which posed a challenge in itself. In fact, two-thirds of the earlier movers already had at least one child when they arrived in Costa Rica. For the newer generation, the average age at migration is 35 years. Because they were older at the time of arrival, and not fresh out of college, many of the immigrants came to Costa Rica with more financial capital than their pre-1991 counterparts. Only 37.5 per cent had children with them when they arrived; 25 per cent were divorced men who migrated without their children. Migration characteristics are summarized in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>MIGRATION CHARACTERISTICS BY GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for migrating</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>Didn’t have any; 13% later brought family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at migration</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once in the country, all immigrants had to start by learning the language – only two of those surveyed reported being fluent in Spanish upon migration. Second was finding employment, and here too, there are big differences between the groups. The pre-1991 generation arrived as Soviets to a capitalist country. Many informants alluded to the reception that they found in Costa Rican society: they encountered a fear of communism, particularly given the ongoing civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. All the early movers spoke of hard times because their husbands’ degrees were not recognized by Costa Rican employers at first. The vast majority (92.9%) of the earlier immigrants said they found a job “on their own”, either by looking for employment or starting their own business. Only 7.1 per cent said that someone recommended them for a job. One informant explained the situation she and her husband faced:

My husband had illusions about returning to his country, Costa Rica. He was offered a job at a [Soviet state farm] but he rejected it, he said he wanted to come back and be useful here. But we found that there was a lot of fear, nobody wanted to hire him because they thought we were revolutionaries, and there was a lot of fear because of what was going on in Nicaragua. So we went through some very difficult times. I did what I could, and the family was helpful, sometimes they would buy [their daughter] clothes so we had something to give her for Christmas. But it was very hard. Until the government finally realized that these people were very educated and useful, and slowly they started hiring them. Now many have very good jobs. – Nadia Ivanova,

53, Russian woman

This illustrates that although all of these immigrants had some sort of social network upon arrival, comprised of their spouse’s Costa Rican relatives, this network did not prove itself useful in the job search, nor was it an association with the other Soviet brides.

Of the newer generation, 50 per cent reported being recommended for a job by another immigrant or having been hired by a Russian, and only 37.5 per cent found a job on their own or started their own business. Business ownership, in fact, is an important factor in defining differences between the older and newer generations. Although 80 per cent of the pre-1991 immigrants now hold professional occupations (more than half are teachers or professors), 53.3 per cent reported being self-employed at some point since migrating. Of the newer generation, 37.5 per cent hold professional jobs, and only 25 per cent reported being self-employed either currently or at some point after arrival in Costa Rica. Most of the jobs that the self-employed earlier migrants reported, however, were quite specialized, such as doing translations or teaching private Russian lessons to the public. Newer migrants, however, involved themselves more in business ownership, such as opening a restaurant or small stores. This kind of business requires employees. It was in these businesses that newer migrants often found jobs. Table 5 summarizes the characteristics of the settlement process.
Finally, several measures of assimilation also vary by generation. As expected, Spanish language use is more extensive in the older generation; half of the group claimed to use both Spanish and Russian at home, and only 35.7 per cent said they use Russian exclusively. Among the newer group only 7.1 per cent use both languages at home, while 87.5 per cent rely on Russian.

We asked informants whether their children attended a public or private school in Costa Rica. This is a good indicator of economic status since private schools tend to be expensive and only upper middle class families can afford them. Furthermore, those who can afford to pay for a private education for their children usually do, since the educational quality is well above the majority of Costa Rica’s public schools. I found that of those immigrants who had children, all (100%) of the newer generation placed them in public schools, while 64.29 per cent of the older generation placed their children in a private school at some point. This indicates a higher socio-economic status for the older generation. The newer generation arrives with more financial capital, true, but this is often invested in business and homeownership. Private schools emphasize a bilingual education, and this might be harder for the newer immigrants who are still learning Spanish.

Given the deteriorating Russian economy, it is no surprise that almost half of the older generation’s households send remittances to relatives in their country of origin. Some people mentioned giving their relatives a credit card that they in turn pay for in Costa Rica as an alternative to wiring remittances, which can be expensive. Of the newer generation, 37.5 per cent of immigrants send remittances, and 25 per cent of them receive money from family members in Russia. This money is occasional rather than a steady periodic amount.

When asked about their friendships, informants had different reactions. The question “where are your close friends from” received the response “Russian” from 77 per cent of the pre-1991 generation. Just more than 15 per cent of this group claimed they had both Russian and Costa Rican friends, and less than
8 per cent claimed to have exclusively Costa Rican friends. Only half of the newer generation, however, answered the question. We encountered remarks such as “who can you really trust” or “how does one know who the real friends are”. Of those that did provide an answer, 50 per cent said their close friends were Russian, and one-third said their friends were exclusively Costa Rican. Furthermore, when asked to identify additional potential informants (given the snowball sampling technique), most pre-1991 respondents gave numerous names, which quickly became repetitive. One informant gave references to several recent migrants whom she met due to the nature of her job. Older migrants, however, admitted to having little information about newer immigrants (see Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-1991</th>
<th>Post-1991</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language at home</td>
<td>50% mixed</td>
<td>87.5% Russian; 7.1% mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in schools</td>
<td>64% private</td>
<td>100% public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances</td>
<td>50% send</td>
<td>37.5% sends; 25% receives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>77% Russian; 15% mixed</td>
<td>50% Russian; 30% Costa Rican</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MIGRANT NETWORKS AND MOTIVATIONS

When researchers model international migration they tend to emphasize motivations – what drives migration rates (pull-push economic models, see Massey et al., 1998: 33), or a focus on the period of settlement and assimilation (see Alba and Nee, 1997; Gans, 1997). And while debate continues over where emphasis should lie, whether the focus is on motivation, or reception and assimilation, researchers typically highlight the role played by social networks. Neither model is fully applicable to the example of Russian migrants to Costa Rica. While social networks are present for most, if not all, Russian migrants to Costa Rica, there is a shift in the structure and role of these networks as we move from Soviet era to post-Soviet era migrants.

Furthermore, the motivations for migration, and the reception of Russian migrants also changes for those who arrived before 1991, and those who arrived following the fall of the Berlin wall and collapse of the Soviet system after 1991. In the case of Russians in Costa Rica, women who married Costa Ricans studying in the Soviet Union set off the flow. The decision to migrate responded not to a calculation of expected benefits, but to a structural factor: the scholarships
that the Soviet Government granted to Costa Rican students demanded that they return home upon the completion of their studies.

Neoclassical economics argue that individual rational actors base their decisions to migrate on a cost-benefit calculation (Todaro, 1969). The calculation factors in the probability of avoiding deportation, the probability of employment at destination, the earnings at destination, and subtracts the probabilities of employment in the community of origin, earnings if employed in the community of origin, and the costs of movements. If the expected net return is positive, then the migrant decides to move (Massey, 1993). This theory does little to explain the moves by Soviet era, Costa Rica-bound migrant women who married Costa Rican men in the USSR for advanced university studies. However, post-1991 migration is often economically motivated and there is a rational calculation taking place. Push-pull models (for example, Lee, 1966) further clarify post-1991 moves. The declining post-Soviet economy and the perception of opportunity (as well as warm weather) and the potential for a future trip to the United States are clear pull factors. An alternative theory stresses the choice processes in migration behaviour. Besides the expectation of positive outcomes resulting from migration, two other preconditions exist: that the migration choice be cognitively and physically available to individuals, and that they possess sufficient resources (capital, information, networks) to implement the move (De Jong, 1999). In this theory, values and goals become important, for migration is a channel to fulfil those goals. Certainly, Soviet era women who fell in love and married Costa Rican men created opportunities to move that at least a handful chose to follow.

Scholars also argue that the level at which the migration decisions are made is the family or household. Households look to diversify their sources of income to reduce risks, and migration is one such strategy. Particularly, households look to improve not only their net income, but also their income relative to other households. Changes in the income of another household, therefore, can trigger migration to ward off what Massey (1993) describes as “relative deprivation”, whenever migrant households perceive deprivation when they compare themselves with other households.

Macro theory places the cause of international migration on geographical differences in the demand and supply of labour (Massey, 1993). Dual labour market theory further stresses that a bifurcation of the labour market in industrialized nations into highly skilled versus non-skilled jobs promotes international migration as native-born workers move up the job hierarchy and employers look to foreign workers who will accept the lowest-paying jobs (Massey, 1993). Finally, world systems theory views international migration as a natural
consequence of the expansion of capitalism. As societies industrialize, people become less attached to land and more mobile – mobilization that is facilitated through highly effective transportation and communication, the same channels that mobilize goods and capital (Massey, 1993). Transnational models account for those immigrants who retain strong ties to their home countries, and are embedded in the society there (Kearney, 1996). Who exactly is considered a transnational migrant, and just how and to what extent they must be involved in their community of origin to be considered so, however, is often contested (Kasinitz et al., 2002).

Macro theories are effective in explaining large influxes of unskilled migrants into industrialized countries. There are many other alternate patterns of migration, however, besides South-North migration. Further research is needed to understand what triggers flows that do not follow traditional paths.

Micro theories also stress the importance of social networks. Social networks play an important role in the decision to migrate. Massey (1993: 448) defines migrant social networks as “[…] sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through the ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin”. These networks lower the costs and risks of migrating, therefore increasing the expected net returns of movement. The social context in both the sending and receiving community is altered through migration, usually increasing the likelihood of more migration. This process, termed cumulative causation, eventually leads to self-sustained movement between two regions or countries (Massey, 1990). When migration flows become extremely large, formal and informal institutions arise that facilitate the process, such as smugglers, fake document providers, immigrant rights organizations, arranged marriages, etc. (Massey, 1993).

Social capital becomes essential during an immigrant’s settlement. These connections are not limited to other immigrants, but often they begin as such. Social capital is a resource in that it gives the migrant privileged access to information (Portes, 1998). For migrants, having a network ameliorates the impact of the migration, for it can provide them with jobs, housing, and material and emotional support. Implicitly agreed in these networks is the idea of reciprocity: members of a network are expected to also be available when someone else needs them. Menjívar (2000) showed in her study of El Salvadoran immigrants the negative consequences of these networks. People with limited resources may become overly indebted and unable to reciprocate.

Networks do not always have the same effect on men and women. Hagan (1998) found that Mayan immigrants in Houston benefited more from social
networks than their female counterparts. Because they were mostly hired as housekeepers, the women had limited opportunities to meet other people, while the men were more often in contact with outsiders. The men’s networks also increased given the expansion of their workplaces.

The benefits of social networks are clear, and given that members comply with the implicit rules (such as reciprocating), it is assumed that having a common background is a basis for the formation of a network. Newcomers, in particular, can relate to compatriots or coethnics more easily than to members of the host society, particularly if they speak a different language.

Given these numerous theories, we expected Russian migration to follow a pattern of cumulative causation: each new immigrant entering Costa Rica relies on those who have settled to facilitate their own settlement in Costa Rica. We show, however, that in the case of Russians in Costa Rica, different values and motivations downplayed the importance of compatriots in the formation of social networks.

DISCUSSION

Given the previous data, we found that the period of arrival of Russian immigrants in Costa Rica coincides with the values that they brought to Costa Rica, and the reasons why they migrated in the first place. We expected pioneer migrants, having no social ties to the host country, to face difficult times in settling and adjusting to their new society. This was true for many of the pre-1991 immigrants, who despite having Costa Rican husbands (and their husbands’ families as a social network) had great difficulty obtaining jobs and had high levels of self-employment. Not only did the husband’s family not prove useful in helping them to find a job, but other Russian women could not help either, for they were in the same situation. As one informant explained:

The other (Russian) women couldn’t really help me out because they were in the same boat. They were also trying to find a job and make ends meet. But they did offer…how can I say it…moral support. We knew that we were all going through the same thing.

– Anna Petrovna, 49, Russian woman

Culture shock was an important obstacle to immigrants, something mentioned by members of both groups. In the case of the pre-1991 women, many attributed their high divorce rate to cultural differences. In spite of being divorced and not altogether adapted to Costa Rican society, none of our informants mentioned a divorced Russian woman returning home.
By the time I got divorced, I had my children, and they are Costa Rican. Besides, we knew what was happening (in Russia) and we didn’t want to go back, the economy was going to collapse and we had our job and our life here. But many wish they could go back. – Svetlana Nikolaeva, 44, Ukrainian woman

Social network theory posits that having compatriots in the receiving country encourages further migration because it lowers the perceived costs of migrating. Furthermore, networks in receiving countries should make settlement into the new society easier. We found that less than 40 per cent of the post-1991 group migrated to Costa Rica because they had family members or friends in the country. Instead, some chose Costa Rica because they believed it was easy to gain entrance there.

Originally, I wanted to go to the US, but it is very hard to get a visa there. So we came to Costa Rica, now I have refugee status. I never thought I would stay in Costa Rica. The hardest thing is to find a job at my age. In Costa Rica it doesn’t matter if you are a foreigner or a national, there is discrimination by age. [Employers] want people under 35. – Tatyana Filippova, 48, Uzbek woman

Others mentioned business opportunities, and even adventure. What is certain is that the vast majority of the newer immigrants are leaving their countries given the economic and political (one informant mentioned the Chechnyan war) difficulties they face, and arrive in Costa Rica with few social resources.

Once in Costa Rica, however, the existing community of compatriots does not always support the integration of new immigrants. Our data shows that half of the new immigrants started their own business. Some of them hired other recent arrivals. Only one of the post-1991 immigrants worked for a Russian who arrived during the Soviet era. The newer generation also has the extra cost of renting; half rented houses upon arrival while almost all the older immigrants stayed with their husband’s families.

Many immigrants from both the pre-1991 and post-1991 groups voiced the idea of not staying. One mentioned the case of a Russian artist whose art was “not appreciated by the Costa Rican public” and decided to return to Russia. Even for those in the country a long time, Russia often seems more like home. Two informants who arrived in the late 1980s explained:

I can’t believe I’ve been here so long. I always feel like this is temporary, like I’ll go back one of these days, but I’ve been saying it for over a decade now. – Oleg Kovalenko, 49, Russian man

It’s the seasons. In Costa Rica there are no seasons, so the weather is always the same. That is why time goes by so fast. In Russia, you went through spring, summer, autumn and winter and you knew that was a year. But here, the weather is the same and before you know it, time went by. – Olga Lebedeva, 50, Russian woman
Friendship networks are also different for the two groups. More than three-fourths of the pre-1991 immigrants have close friendship ties with other Russians, all of them also from the earlier group. This figure was obtained by asking informants about their closest friends whom they speak to in confidence (*amigos de confianza*). Half of the newer immigrants reported close friendships with compatriots, all of them from post-1991. In other words, when Russian immigrants have close friendships with other Russian immigrants, it is with those who arrived under similar circumstances. The newer immigrants reported higher levels of close ties with Costa Ricans, suggesting greater propensity to assimilate. The fact that these newer immigrants did not encounter the hostilities that their compatriots did when they arrived as Soviets might explain their higher rates of close ties with Costa Ricans.

In summary, with a few exceptions, the Russian immigrants in Costa Rica operate in networks that are for the most part limited to other Russians arriving in the same period. Both groups are well aware of the existence of the others, but their contact rarely goes beyond a short-term formal relationship. For instance, one pre-1991 informant hired a recently arrived migrant to paint her house; a post-1991 immigrant needed a legal document and she chose a Russian lawyer long settled in the country for help.

The question remains, then, why do these immigrants not form close ties with other compatriots who arrived in a different period. Our data shows that the differences are not related to age or educational level. The data does suggest, however, that immigrants from each period of arrival hold different values that cause distrust. De Jong’s (1999) emphasis on immigrants’ values prior to migration is relevant in this case. Russian migration to Costa Rica shows that people from similar backgrounds who hold different values and goals might choose migration to the same place as a way to fulfil those goals. Once in the host society, however, the fact that the values are different overrides the unity that one would expect from people who find themselves with something in common: they are Russian immigrants.

The immigrants themselves attest to this. We have endless examples of immigrants from both the pre- and post-1991 group making reference to “the others” and their distrust of them. Here we include a few:

> I don’t understand the immigrants who come on their own to start a business, because [in Costa Rica] there isn’t a need for professionals. All the markets are saturated. – Nadia Novikova, 46, Russian woman

> The problem with the old [immigrants] is that they are stuck with the old values, you can’t even talk to them. – Aleksey Morozov, 50, Russian man


161
I know they are there [the recent immigrants], but I don’t really try to find them, we are very different. They come here wanting to start a business, they want to be rich. Can you believe some of them already come with money? – Galina Belova, 57, Ukrainian woman

I don’t mix with the new Russians because they come with another mentality. There is this couple, they came with money and are building a fancy house. The old Russians, you know already, you know who is who. But the new ones you don’t know them, I feel like a stranger in the new Russia. – Irina Mironova, 45, Russian woman

I don’t talk to the old Russians. I just don’t. – Serguey Pavlov, 17, Uzbek man

This distrust of each other and of their values keeps the Russian immigrants from each group largely separated. For the older generation, Russians from their period of arrival meant friends. They were pioneers like them who struggled to make a living, but they were also people with similar values and life histories who they could rely on. The new immigrants are strangers, Russians with very different values who want to own businesses and make profit. Costa Ricans are those that made them feel unwelcome when they first arrived, but some of whom have become friends.

For the newer generation, the older Russian immigrants have “the old values” and they are not very interested in establishing close social ties with them. Other recent immigrants sometimes provide friendships, and those who own businesses provide employment opportunities. Costa Ricans did not fear them for being Soviets, and they provide friendships too.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we tested social network theory to see if it applies to the case of Russian immigrants in Costa Rica. We divided the informants into two groups, pre- or post-1991, according to their year of arrival. We expected newer immigrants to have migrated to Costa Rica following networks. In addition, we thought that having a large group of settled compatriots would play a key role in the settlement process of the more recent immigrants. We found, however, that the reasons for migrating to Costa Rica are important in defining their social networks once in the country. As predicted by De Jong’s (1999) model, motivations for migration are an important factor prior to migrating, but we found that these motivations are also crucial in establishing social ties upon arrival.

The pre-1991 group consisted of primarily Russian women who migrated following Costa Rican husbands. Some of the recent immigrants did go to Costa
Generations and motivations: Russian and other former Soviet immigrants

Rica to join a family member, but most chose it on their own, and looked for business opportunities. Coming from two very different Russias, the Soviet and the capitalist one, these immigrants brought values with them that caused them to distrust and therefore limit their social relationships with immigrants from the other period. In other words, the period of arrival becomes more important in defining their social networks than a common background and a shared cultural identity, and a shared identity as Russian immigrants in the host country.

NOTES

1. Records kept by the Migration Office (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería) indicate a steady increase of Russians entering the country. These data include the entry of Russians holding any visa, but do not specify the visa type. It is safe to assume that most if not all hold tourist visas, as did all the informants, but some will probably remain in Costa Rica.

2. To facilitate reading, from this point on the word “Russian” will be used to substitute the name of any of the former Soviet republics from which people have migrated to Costa Rica.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

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GÉNÉRATIONS ET MOTIVATIONS : IMMIGRANTS RUSSES ET AUTRES IMMIGRANTS EX-SOVIÉTIQUES AU COSTA RICA

Nous examinons dans cet article le rôle qu’ont joué les réseaux sociaux dans la migration et l’installation des immigrants russes et autres immigrants de l’ex-Union soviétique au Costa Rica. Ce groupe d’immigrants est particulièrement intéressant en ce qu’il constitue un exemple de migration à partir d’une ex-nation communiste dans un pays du tiers-monde et non dans un pays riche (États-Unis ou pays européen). De plus, des femmes soviétiques qui ont épousé des Costariciens vers la fin des années 1970 sont à l’origine de cette migration. Notre recherche avait pour objectif d’examiner la structure et la signification de ces réseaux sociaux d’immigrants ainsi que le rôle qu’ils jouent dans le processus de migration et pendant l’installation. Les résultats donnent à penser qu’il existe une différence significative dans la forme et la fonction des réseaux sociaux des immigrants arrivés avant 1991 (pendant l’époque soviétique) et de ceux qui sont venus après 1991 et à la suite de l’effondrement de l’Union soviétique.

GENERACIONES Y MOTIVACIONES: INMIGRANTES RUSOS Y DE LA EX UNIÓN SOVIÉTICA EN COSTA RICA

En este artículo se examina el papel que han desempeñado las redes sociales en la emigración y asentamiento de inmigrantes rusos y de la ex Unión Soviética en Costa Rica. Este grupo de inmigrantes reviste particular interés puesto que es un ejemplo de la emigración desde los ex países comunistas a países del tercer mundo, y no del primer mundo (Europa y Los Estados Unidos). Es más, a principios de los años setenta, fue un grupo de mujeres rusas, que contrajeron matrimonio con costarricenses, quienes pusieron en marcha esta emigración. Este estudio tiene por objeto examinar la estructura y finalidad de esas redes sociales de inmigrantes y el papel que desempeñan en el proceso migratorio y de asentamiento propiamente dichos. Los resultados del estudio apuntan a notables diferencias en la estructura y funciones de las redes sociales de los inmigrantes que llegaron antes de 1991 (es decir durante la era soviética) y aquellos que llegaron después de 1991, tras el desmembramiento de la Unión Soviética.