Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom

IFR Displacement Lab

Research Objective: Identify the strategies for preserving and expanding increasing social capital deployed by Russians who emigrated from Russia with their children.

Methodology: Qualitative methodology based on 20 semi-structured interviews (ranging from 60 to 120 minutes) with Russians who left the country with their children analyzed through the mobilities paradigm. During the interviews, respondents were not only asked about the transformation of intangible forms of social capital but also about issues related to their everyday lives, such as the quality of education in Russia and in their current country of residence, the availability of infrastructure for living with children, their potential plans for returning to Russia and the conditions required for such a return.

Supervisors of the IFR Displacement Lab:

- Anna Kuleshova — a project coordinator at the Social Foresight Group, Ph.D. in Sociology, journalist
- Polina Aronson — Ph.D. in sociology, Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences (Berlin, Germany)

Participants of the IFR Displacement Lab:

- Andrey Frolov — an independent researcher, master's degree in political science
- Aurora Vettori Levorin — a history master’s student, INALCO (Paris, France)
- Varvara Shipnevskaia — a sociology master’s student, Konstanz university (Germany)

Read in Russian

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Interview

The interview guide consisted of a sociodemographic section and several parts:

- Section 1 (Preschool, School, and Extracurricular Education in Russia)

This section contained questions concerning respondents' degree of satisfaction with the quality of education in Russia, including schools, kindergartens, and extracurricular activities their children attended. It also addressed their future plans for their children—whether they considered higher education mandatory and an assessment of its value.

- Section 2 (Preschool, School, and Additional Education in Emigration)

Here, respondents answered questions about how their children were integrating into the education system of the host country, what schools and extracurricular activities the children attended, how the family chose these activities, and how they spent their free time.

- Section 3 (Social Connections After Emigration)
- Section 4 (Old Connections)

In these sections, we asked respondents to describe their social circles, and the role played in their social circles by newly acquired contacts. These sections also contained questions about interactions with Russian-speaking emigrants and a reevaluation of the role of the Russian language.

- Section 5 (Plans for the Future)

In the final section, respondents shared their plans for further life in emigration and answered questions about a potential return to Russia.

Why target families with children?

Households with preschool and school-age children, as well as those with children preparing to enter universities, colleges, and other educational institutions, have specific characteristics which affect their planning for the future in host communities.

These families must develop medium- and long-term life planning strategies in emigration, taking into account the need to ensure their children continuous education.

On the one hand, this forces parents to start researching the educational institutions of the host country as quickly as possible, which in turn helps accelerate the habituation of both children and parents to the new environment.

On the other hand, parents are limited in their ability to frequently change their place of residence due to the necessity of providing their children with stable educational conditions while minimizing stress caused by constant moves. This leads to additional pressure that parents face when choosing the appropriate educational strategy for their children in emigration, having to take into account such factors as differences in educational programs and legal barriers.

Sociodemographic Data

We conducted interviews with 20 families who had experience of emigration to the following 11 countries: Cyprus, France, Georgia, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Montenegro, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, the Netherlands, and Türkiye. While this sample is not representative of the general population, within the context of the selected research methodology, it allows us to draw conclusions regarding family motivations and considerations when choosing an educational strategy for their children and the self-perception of Russians in emigration.

16 of the 20 interviewed families are nuclear families — children are raised by both parents. Eight families have one child, eight families have two children, and in the remaining four families, three or more children are raised.

The ages of the respondents range from 27 to 63 years, with the majority being women (there are only 4 male respondents out of 20). The ages of the children vary from 4.5 to 26

years (all numbers refer to the time of the interviews, conducted in October-November 2024). The average median age of the respondent is 42 years, and that of the child is 12.5 years.

The overwhelming majority of respondents emigrated between 2021 and 2024 (only 1 respondent left Russia in 2011) due to political persecution (personal or directed at the employer), disagreement with the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent political repression and mobilization.

The reason for emigration was not related to political persecution or the political beliefs of either of the parents only in 3 cases out of 20. However, relocation after receiving a job was a frequently noted exit strategy, with political discontent cited as the reason.

A third of the interviewed families changed their place of residence during their emigration—but in only 1 case did the family in the country of first choice apply for documents for further relocation and had minimal contact with the host community. In another case, the child did not attend local educational institutions but was involved in extracurricular activities. In yet another case, the children were entirely educated in Russian through online formats.

13 out of 20 respondents lived in Moscow or the Moscow region before emigrating, 5 respondents lived in St. Petersburg, and 2 respondents lived in major cities of the Ural region.

15 out of 20 respondents seemed to belong to the middle-class before emigration (they could afford any purchase except for a house or car, which they already owned), 2 respondents had sufficient income for any purchase, and 3 respondents reported a difficult financial situation.

In 16 families, children had experience with in-person education in Russian schools before emigration — most often in regular secondary schools, less often in specialized lyceums or gymnasiums (special types of schools in the Russian educational system), and occasionally in private schools. One family had children attending school entirely online, while another family had children in a small family-run school.

7 families had experience with the preschool education system in Russia (2 families sent their children to English-speaking kindergartens, though the children attended for less than 6 months). In 2 families, the parents did not manage to enroll their child or children in

kindergarten or school but had an understanding of what types of institutions would meet their expectations.

Preserving of Social Capital Accumulated in Russia

None of the interviewed families ceased communication with relatives and friends who remained in Russia — all respondents noted the importance of maintaining "old" contacts and staying in touch with them. This applies to both adult family members and children — parents mentioned that their children continue to communicate online with friends from Russia.

Contacts are not only maintained with like-minded individuals but also with friends and relatives who support the official position of the Russian government. They explain this by long-standing relationships, which are considered more valuable than current political disagreements, though they note a significant decrease in trust in these communications.

Many of the close contacts formed before emigration provide financial help with services and purchases that cannot be paid for using Russian bank cards issued by Russian financial institutions.

The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining offline communication — friends and relatives visit them, and they plan joint vacations.

The level of trust remains high — political topics are avoided in conversations when acquaintances or relatives had already requested not to discuss politics before emigration. Respondents note that for their acquaintances, communication with emigrants has become one of the safest ways to express their political discontent amidst the growing distrust within Russian society.

In three cases, respondents noted the critical importance of professional, activist, and diaspora communities — with the first case involving closed chat groups for employees of independent Russian media, another involving active participants in NGO activities, and the third involving chat groups for people from the large and politically active Ural region, the name of which is omitted at the request of the respondent.

Building Social Capital in Emigration

Among the respondents, there are no systematic attempts to build stable social relationships with local residents. On the one hand, this is due to limited communication opportunities, given the insufficient knowledge of the host community's language. On the other hand, the formation of a "bubble" is observable

Russians obtain important information (on issues such as legalization, finding housing, obtaining documents and insurance, reviews about schools, clubs, and extracurricular activities) primarily from Russian-language sources — mainly Telegram chats, channels, and knowledge bases created by other emigrants.

New contacts made in emigration, which respondents consider important and useful, are almost 100% Russian-speaking — families turn to them for help with raising children, or to leave keys to their apartments when they go away.

Despite an overall high level of trust in members of the host community (more on this in the section "Trust in Host Communities"), respondents note that they cannot rely on contacts outside of the Russian-speaking community for issues related to education, legalization, or solving everyday problems. This is because Russians (and Russian speakers who do not know the local language) have to overcome obstacles that the citizens of the host country are unfamiliar with.

In such situations, respondents view it as rational to turn to those who have solved similar problems — these include all Russian speakers, with no clear distinction between Russians and citizens of other Post-soviet countries.

We also note the frequent preference for news and analytical sources in English and local languages on YouTube and Telegram channels in Russian, which are also created by emigrants. These are usually small sources that have expertise and experience living in the respondent's host country. Respondents value the expertise gained from their accumulated life experience in the host country.

Trust in Host Communities

Most respondents trust local residents, national governments, and educational institutions, noting a high level of perceived safety.

Respondents are satisfied with the openness of host communities, their willingness to help, and their ability to make connections without discrimination based on citizenship. However, as we noted earlier, Russians tend to trust other Russian speakers more when it comes to solving complex life issues and dealing with emergencies.

Trust Among Russian Emigrants

Although most of the families we interviewed left Russia for political reasons, they prefer not to divide emigrants into "economic" and "political" categories. The level of trust is high, as is the willingness to discuss sensitive political topics with unfamiliar Russian-speaking individuals.

Respondents mention the shared problems faced by most Russians who left the country and the significant number of people who share their political views, including those who left before February 24, 2022. The willingness on part of emigrants from previous waves to help “new” emigrants through chats, groups and offline plays an important role in this.

“Bubbles” of Parents and Children’s Habituation

Children and adults showcase significantly different behavioural strategies in emigration. This gap is mainly the consequence of children's inevitable integration into social interactions with members of the host community through educational institutions. However, parents often adjust these trajectories to ensure their child maintains contact with the Russian-speaking community.

In all of the analyzed cases, except one where the respondent knows the host community’s language and separates their civic identity from their association with Russia, respondents note that they continue to live in a Russian-speaking environment abroad, only leaving it in cases where they work in companies with non-Russian employees.

Emigrants welcome extracurricular activities organized by the host community or the government for their children to enroll in, and take advantage of these opportunities, however

this mostly happens when information and reviews are easily available from open sources or from the school itself (including those among parents who are ready to share this information).

When difficulties arise in obtaining information, parents turn to organizations created by Russian-speaking emigrants — this makes it easier to get verified reviews in Russian through emigrant chats or from long-term members of the Russian-speaking community in the host country. In cases where no suitable activities exist, emigrants may create them themselves.

Respondents from Serbia and Portugal, for example, opened their own cultural centers for Russian-speaking children, calling them “cultural daycare” for children. On the one hand, this is explained by the limitations placed on the families’ planning horizon — respondents may consider the possibility of both returning to Russia soon or continuing their emigration, so it is easier to leave the child in a familiar environment.

On the other hand, it may reflect dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of extracurricular services. Given the closed communication within the Russian-speaking community (almost all respondents noted that their new acquaintances in the place of residence are mostly Russian-speaking, regardless of the method of introduction), emigrants might opt to build their own parallel structures for extracurricular education.

At the same time, the founders and active participants in such initiatives note the temporary nature of these solutions — they believe the economic potential is limited, and that children will inevitably develop other interests that may not be connected to the Russian-speaking community.

Children’s Habituation and Relationships with Non-Russian-speaking Immigrants

In contrast to adults, children generally find it easier to socialize with local peers and members of non-Russian-speaking emigrant groups. Despite maintaining contacts within the Russian-speaking community and with their friends in Russia, children are much more successful at integrating into local life. The difference in education systems often favours children of Russian emigrants, who, thanks to that, may find it easier to integrate into the new educational environment (more on this in the “Satisfaction with the quality of education” section)

Respondents noted that their children are able to interact with their peers far more freely than adults. One respondent mentioned that children of Russian and Ukrainian parents attend children's parties even if their parents may have difficulties in communication — this issue does not prevent the children from building relationships on their own.

Relations with Russian-speaking non-Russians

In the analyzed cases, respondents only mentioned 1 instance in which Russian children were bullied by Ukrainian children — elsewhere, parents noted that their children were much more successful at establishing non-conflictual communication, and parents did not need to interfere in this process.

Adults noted tension in relationships and fairly frequent refusals on part of Ukrainians to communicate with Russians, but conflicts almost never arose. Most respondents noted that they had been able to build trusting relationships with Ukrainian families by openly discussing their stance on Russian aggression.

Most respondents see themselves as a part of the Russian-speaking community, including all emigrants who speak Russian — this includes people from Eastern Europe who were not part of the USSR and children from mixed marriages in host communities.

Preservation of the Russian Language for Children

A Majority of respondents consider it critically important to maintain a high level of proficiency in the Russian language for their children — this includes the ability to read and write in Russian.

The reasons parents emphasize these skills include the desire to communicate with their children and grandchildren in Russian, the belief that the child should speak the language of their country of origin to remain part of Russian culture, and frustration with the frequent use of scientific terms and other words in the language of instruction after school.

Almost half of the respondents have hired Russian language tutors or paid for lessons at Russian online schools primarily to preserve the language. One respondent even moved to another country so their children could receive offline education in Russian.

Parents who are not concerned about language preservation are mostly those whose children already have a wide circle of communication in Russian or attend senior grades at school.

At the same time, parents understand that learning Russian should not come in the way of the acquisition of foreign languages, which offer children more opportunities for higher education. Nevertheless, the Russian language remains an important cultural value for them, one they are not willing to abandon.

Returning to Russia

Almost all respondents do not have medium-term plans to return to Russia, with only 1 case noting the inevitability of return — this family is in an EU country based on a long-term work contract.

However, several emigrants have clearly elaborated criteria under which they are willing to consider returning — the end of the war, a change in the political regime, or a few years of stabilization in the socio-economic situation ("without empty shelves and the 90s").

Interestingly, 2 distinct return trajectories have emerged — permanent residence and frequent, safe visits to friends and relatives.

Although emigration with school-age children poses additional challenges, the presence of children is also seen as an argument for emigration. Some respondents expressed concerns about the decreasing quality of education and living standards in Russia for their children. In such cases, the aspiration to a "better future" for their children sometimes leads families to emigrate.

Some respondents mentioned that it was important for them to provide their children with the possibility of entering European universities by obtaining an international diploma. Although parents would have to remain abroad until their children finish school and obtain the foreign diploma, some nurture the idea of returning back to Russia afterwards.

Notably, some respondents chose their emigration country based on the perceived superior educational advantages it could provide for their children, and some mentioned choosing the place of residence in such a way that the child lived at a comfortable distance from the educational institution.

The reverse phenomenon is also observable, namely a reluctance to "burn all bridges" and the preservation of legal rights in the country of origin, including through material capital. In several cases, respondents structured their emigration strategy so that their child could take exams in Russia (BSE/USE) or obtain a Russian diploma: in these cases, families waited until the end of the school year or organized online learning according to Russian educational standards. Thus, parents found ways for their children to settle in the country of emigration or even emigrate to a third country, as well as to facilitate re-emigration.

In light of this, preservation of property in Russia is particularly telling: a fifth of respondents did not sell their apartments in Russia or rent them out for long-term leases. It can be assumed that respondents see the conservation of property in Russia as an important asset in a scenario where they might return.

Satisfaction with the Quality of Education

Almost all respondents express positive assessments of the progress made by foreign educational systems in developing humanistic methodologies, including the level of empathy from teachers and administrators, genuine interest in solving children's learning and habituation problems, and the willingness to provide mentors and assistants who ease the difficulties of emigration for children.

Most of the respondents were dissatisfied with the quality of school education in Russia — among the noted issues were the indifference of teachers and administrators to the development of students' potential, the standardization, and the obsolescence of educational programs.

At the same time, emigrants are dissatisfied with the discipline in their children's learning process — they feel that schools do not spend enough time correcting mistakes, make the curriculum excessively easy, and place too much emphasis on game-based teaching methods. Parents also express surprise at the small amount of homework in comparison with Russia.

One of the main points highlighted by respondents when comparing the educational systems in Russia and in the host countries is the lower level of teaching in subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Parents hire Russian-speaking tutors for these subjects

to ensure that their children’s progress meets their qualifications for what should be expected of a Russian child at that age.

Extracurricular Activities and Clubs

Regardless of social category or family income, Russian parents abroad strive to make sure that their children engage in some form of extracurricular activity, even when they acknowledge that this requires significant financial expenditure. This remains relevant both in Russia and abroad. Only in very rare cases do respondents report that the cost of a particular activity forced them to give it up.

Although responses may be skewed due to reluctance to disclose financial difficulties, the cited reasons for the discontinuation of a particular extra-curricular activity in emigration more often mention a decrease in the available variety of options or the child's refusal to continue extracurricular activities, rather than financial difficulties.

Indeed, respondents noted that the most important challenges to continuing extracurricular activities abroad are the lack of choice and opportunities compared to what is available in large cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, rising costs, and shifting priorities. Respondents emphasized that longer school days in most countries, combined with the need to devote time to learning the local language, reduced the amount of time children can dedicate to the activities of their choice.

In 3 out of 20 cases, respondents mentioned that in Russia, parents found extracurricular activities through organized cultural associations that offered a set of options in one place. One respondent highlighted the practicality of such a solution and regretted that they did not have this option abroad. In emigration, at least in 6 cases, information about extracurricular activities was obtained through "word of mouth." In at least 6 cases, respondents found information through Russian-speaking emigration networks. Overall, respondents in emigration rely more on information and reviews received from friends, acquaintances, parents of classmates, or groups and chats on social networks than on institutional organizations.

In 2 cases out of the total sample, respondents reported that their children were not participating in extracurricular activities. In one of these cases, the family had been in the country for only a few months but planned to start activities soon.

In 8 cases, the children of respondents continued the extracurricular activities they had engaged in previously in Russia, indicating a strong desire to help their children develop skills in depth. In 2 cases, respondents emphasized how much their children were overloaded with activities in Russia and how important extra-curricular activities are in Russian families. In 2 cases, the variety of activities was emphasized, with parents explaining that it was important for them to give their children a diverse range of experiences so that they could later decide what they wanted to focus on.

Redistribution of Family Roles

The majority of respondents noted that they spend much more time with their families and children in emigration, often due to the fact that people from the megacities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, where distances can be measured in hours, now live in relatively small cities where the children's school is only a few minutes' walk away.

It is also notable that most families who could rely on help from grandparents, neighbors, and friends for child-rearing now have to rely only on their own resources, which inevitably increases the amount of time spent with the child.

Interestingly, the contacts that respondents turn to for help in emigration are exclusively Russian-speaking acquaintances who have become close friends after the move.

In most nuclear families, one of the parents has lost their job in their field — a typical case being either the complete loss of a job by the mother or her transition to a new professional sphere.

Mobilizing Resources in Emigration

In the overwhelming majority of cases, respondents aim to continue working in the same field abroad or even in the same company if relocation or remote work is available. However, in some cases, respondents have repurposed their activities, creating new social networks and simultaneously joining new communities and helping themselves integrate into the local labour market. This entrepreneurial approach to the investment of the new environment is found in 6 cases out of our sample.

Of these 6 cases, the repurposing of skills is a way to generate income in only 3 cases. The financial benefit of such initiatives is indirect in 3 out of 6 cases, where respondents

provide services or offer them for free, earning indirect financial gains through recognition or a channel to advertise both themselves and the services they offer. In one case, a startup owner views the service as a worthwhile investment with the expectation of long-term returns.

In all 6 cases, the repurposed resource is aimed at the Russian-speaking emigrant community, and the services provided are designed to ease the emigration process for others. At the same time, in 4 of the 6 cases, respondents are reorienting resources to help other emigrants overcome specific problems, such as providing access to information about life in the country, offering business consultations based on local market specifics, or conducting language classes to improve socialization prospects. In two of the six cases, the efforts are focused on the Russian-speaking "bubble" and use this feature as a defining characteristic, without being geared towards integration into the host country, but only to provide services to the Russian-speaking community.

Although all 6 projects are focused on the Russian-speaking community, and not the local one, in 3 of the 6 cases, the initiators deliberately try to offer a service that caters to all Russian speakers, explaining their political position and providing specific advantages to Ukrainians — for example, in one case, providing free language courses.

Although 4 out of 6 of these enterprises rely on skills acquired through education or previous work experience, in all cases, the respondents depend on personal qualities, language skills, resourcefulness, and adaptability, combining various skills, studying the specifics of the host country, and tailoring their initiative to a new audience and new country, while encouraging respondents to view their situation from an outsider's perspective.

Such initiatives serve as both a way to earn income, a channel for accumulating social capital, and a form of self-help for the Russian-speaking community, with preferential support for its groups that are in the most delicate socio-economic positions.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, based on our respondent's answers we observe a relocation of the central bulk of respondent's social capital in the Russian-speaking community, ties left back the home country are rarely broken and remain strong in a majority of cases, while contacts with the locals are comparatively noticeably weaker than those within the Russian-speaking bubble. Respondents mention the crucial, positive role played by the Russian-language

community abroad in helping its members. Interestingly, the Russian-speaking bubble is also the group that respondents trust the most and that into which they poured most of their resources. As a whole, according to respondent parent's descriptions, it seems that children's social ties are more equally distributed, noting strong ties in most cases in the host country's russian-speaking social networks, and in the home country, with a largely more open approach to opening ties with local Non-Russian speakers than their parents.