From Russia with Code

Published by Duke University Press

From Russia with Code: Programming Migrations in Post-Soviet Times.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70046

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2537303
Information and communication technology specialists are among the most spatially mobile groups in the contemporary global labor market. Russian programmers are no exception; they migrate not only to English-speaking countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia, but also to Europe and Asia. This chapter looks at how Finland has become a meaningful destination country for Russian programmers. Considering Finland seems at once obvious and counterintuitive. It is clear from migration statistics that Russians represent one of the largest minorities in Finland. Due to their geographical proximity and cultural familiarity with the country, many Russian-speaking professionals end up employed by the Finnish IT sector, reputed to be one of the most developed in the world. In terms of migration, however, Finland is not considered by Russians to be an entirely foreign destination. Russians, especially those from the northwestern part of the country, present their neighbor almost as a part of their native land despite important perceived qualitative differences between Russian and Finnish everyday life and consumer culture (Shatokhina 2014).

As one of my informants put it: “Everything is almost the same, but the overall level of the country, its level of civilization is higher [in comparison to Russia]” (Nikolay, aged thirty-five, Espoo).

When comparing migration to Finland and to the UK or Germany, Russian ICT professionals present Finland as something of a compromise destination, almost a quasi-migration. Compared to migration to the US or Canada, moving to Finland is seen as nearly like staying home. If so, why do Russian ICT professionals choose to migrate to Finland rather than stay at home or move to other countries, and how do they explain their choice?
This chapter addresses not the question of migration per se but rather the process through which Russian ICT professionals make sense of their migration to Finland. During my field study in Helsinki in 2013–14, many of the Russian ICT specialists I spoke with relayed surprisingly similar migration narratives. In order to explain this striking consistency, I decided to focus on the values presented by my informants and uncover the reasons for their shared nature.

Generally, Finland is not considered to be a country of mass migration. According to the data of the European Statistical Agency for 2012 (Eurostat 2012), the percentage of the population born outside Finland was 4.8 percent, while in neighboring Sweden it was 15 percent, and in Germany and the UK 12.1 percent. Today the two largest groups of people of foreign descent in Finland come from neighboring Estonia and Russia. Still, despite the relatively small size of these migration flows, Finland is among the top ten countries (Florida 2011) that attract representatives of the so-called global creative class. As Annika Forsander (2009, 10) puts it: “Finland seems to be one of the winners in the global knowledge economy. The explanation for this often points to the combination of a highly developed innovation system that is able to utilize the knowledge economy with the welfare system that offers citizens good services, high-quality education and a safe, equal society to live in.” Finland is a country that had (Auto-Sarasmo 2011) and still has (Lisitsyn 2007) a special place in Russian-Finnish high-tech cooperation. Moreover, “the Russian community size in Helsinki in particular is so large by now that it offers cultural and other services as well as a feeling of home to newly arrived Russians” (Forsander and Raunio 2009, 119). Taken together, all these factors make Finland a place that is actively present in the cultural geography of Russian ICT professionals, especially those from Northwest Russia.

The typologies of migration and the explanation of its mechanisms differ depending on both the school of scholarly thought and the specific group of migrants under consideration. For example, popular discourse on migration puts dislocated people into two categories: “migrants” and “expats.” Whereas “migrants” are usually seen as members of a disadvantaged group forced to leave their place of origin for economic, political, or other reasons, “expats” are seen as a privileged minority who move to enjoy the benefits of a new location. Professionals in ICT could be categorized as “highly skilled labor migration” (i.e., “expats”), but their migration experience cannot be depicted as unequivocally positive (Xiang 2007). It is clear that the various forms of
migration cannot be easily divided into underprivileged “migrants” and prosperous “expats.” In this respect, we might need to understand the sense-making narratives produced by ICT migrants in order to shed more light on the migration process from the perspective of its subjects rather than from an external standpoint. The Russian ICT professionals in Finland, for example, cannot be clearly identified as either migrants or expats. Although they mostly present their personal experience in a positive light, they at the same time admit that the experience was not unequivocally positive for their families.

One way to correct classificatory oversimplification is to look not only at the class distinctions between different migrant groups, but also at different values and behaviors within a particular social class experiencing relocation (Scott 2006). In this way, one is able to perceive a highly skilled migrant not only as a representative of the middle-class professional but also to take into consideration his or her specific migration trajectories and the motives behind them. As Sam Scott (2006, 1112) suggests, one can divide skilled migrant populations (in his case the British middle class in Paris) into various lifestyle types that relate to three primary migration motives: “career path,” “lifestyle preferences,” and “relationships.” A more expanded classification is suggested by Annika Forsander and Mika Raunio (2009, 112–13): “global nomads,” “career builders,” “quality of life seekers,” “social relationships,” and “adventurers.” In this article, I will argue that in the case of Russian-speaking programmers relocating to Finland, it is hardly possible to separate the career path (“career builders”) from lifestyle preferences (“quality of life seekers”) as a main migration motive, as the two are interconnected and mutually supportive.

It is also important to understand how labor migrants create their own geography based on professional imagination. This approach is particularly productive in the case of ICT professionals who are simultaneously members of a global community of practice and yet deeply incorporated into a specific geographical location (Takhteyev 2012). It is also necessary to understand how professional experience influences the geographical imagination of highly skilled people in different localities, how they see those localities, and how they make sense of the position they occupy there and then. This approach allows us to avoid a simplistic understanding of this group as privileged “expats,” as well as an interpretation of migration as driven by a single major reason, simultaneously enabling a more nuanced and complex analysis of the geographical imagination of this migrant group.
Unlike the depiction of migration experience as disruptive often found in the literature (Pine 2014), my research in Finland has indicated that highly skilled professionals who relocate there from Russia tend to present their experience as a generally positive one. The idea of “lifestyle migration” offered by Michaela Benson and Karen O’Reilly (2009, 2) looks especially applicable in this case. According to these authors, “lifestyle migration is the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life.”

The idea of lifestyle as a driving force of career trajectory was also popularized by Richard Florida in his numerous writings about the “creative class.” Though an emphasis on lifestyle and spatial mobility was at the forefront of his ideas (Florida 2005), he failed to appreciate variety within the category of lifestyle, thus casting the creative class as homogeneous, even monolithic. In his reading, lifestyle was related neither to the sphere of professional activity, family status, descent, and/or education nor to previous work or migration experience. Instead, I believe that following Max Weber ([1905] 2003) and Pekka Himanen (2001) we should examine in detail what makes people inside the community of practice act and talk in certain ways (Bucholtz 1999; Thompson 2005); that is, how values and norms are provoked by or provoke certain types of conduct, professional activity, and language use. The questions of how new selves are created in specific professional activities (Miller and Power 2013) and how new forms of conduct and professional narratives develop from new kinds of selves (Rabinow 1997) are relevant to understanding the specific features of a professional group. An understanding of the migration of professionals cannot, therefore, be separated from the forms and nature of professional conduct, or from professional identities and their attendant values, norms, and worldviews. For instance, Rebecca Gill and Gregory Larson (2013, 6) have recently addressed the question of “how entrepreneurs [in the high-tech industry] may construct regional identities in ways that are different, unique, resistant and/or similar to the prominent Silicon Valley model.” This line of inquiry applies well to Russian-speaking ICT professionals in Finland. Like the entrepreneurs studied by Gill and Larson, the ICT specialists I have interviewed do not feel inclined to conform to the US capitalist system and especially the Silicon Valley model (Saxenian 1996), and have developed an image of Finland as a very specific and more attractive place to work and live. It is particularly interesting since the same holds true for the case of Jewish ICT workers in the Boston area (West, this volume) and in Israel (Fedorova on Israel, this volume).
In this chapter, my place of departure lies within a paradox: though people may find themselves in a new location due to a constellation of highly specific circumstances, they nevertheless strive to make sense of their relocation experience by relating it to a relatively stable set of norms and values that they themselves hold. By addressing this paradox I do not try to answer the question of why people migrate or why they stay in a destination country, but how this experience is used for the purpose of self-presentation and narrativization or legitimization of their life trajectory. In these narratives one can witness a process of selection and assemblage of various elements of mundane migration practices, professional aspirations, and sociopolitical values that result in the production and reproduction of a coherent narrative and coherent narrator’s self.

First, spatial mobility is an ever-present ideal model for my informants. Though probably not fully realized in real life, it is seen as an attractive model and a potential future option. Second, I will show how Russians who relocated to Finland try to make retrospective sense of their experience, despite the lack of a conscious and deliberate migration strategy. Finally, I look at how these sense-making narratives resonate with the working ethics and lifestyle preferences these practitioners claim to espouse. My analysis is based on twelve interviews with Russian-speaking ICT specialists in Finland conducted during the winter of 2013–14, mostly in Helsinki. Three were conducted outside of Finland as interlocutors had moved either back to Russia or to a third country. The interviews focused on migration, with a specific emphasis on everyday life experience and work-related issues. Most of the informants were found via LinkedIn. All the informants are Russian speakers who have been or were employed in Finland for at least six months. All of them are male, mostly in their early thirties. The majority relocated to Finland with their spouses and sometimes with their children.

Several narratives were strikingly consistent across the interviews. This is an intriguing finding, as I have not managed to trace this back to any kind of shared social community to which my informants belong. Usually they live rather uninvolved lives centered on work and home. They do not tend to associate with the Russian-speaking diaspora widely present in Finland, nor do they build strong ties with either local or foreign colleagues. They are mostly bounded by the limits of their nuclear families and close circle of like-minded friends. At the same time, they are very satisfied with their life in Finland. Their positive migration narratives are only occasionally problematized by the less positive experiences of their wives and children, which however remain external to their own self-presentation strategies.
Most of the Russian programmers I talked to present their migration experience as in keeping with their overall life trajectory. They do not dwell upon their migration experience or present the push-and-pull factors (so common in migration literature) that made them relocate; instead, they see it as a natural step forward that does not need detailed justification. No one recalls any hesitations or conflict at the time they decided to leave Russia for Finland. What is more, there were no extraordinary preparations and the very process of relocation was not seen as a “big deal.” Most of them incorporate their migration stories into their career paths without discontinuity.

As Alexander (aged thirty-two, Helsinki) explains:

We started to talk with my wife [about the possibility of relocating], and we already had children by that time. We started to discuss that it would be good to look around, where it would be possible. . . . And I was tired a bit, that is, professional growth had stopped at the place I was then. Everything worked out on its own. And there was no need to search. . . . Well, Finland was close . . . and my wife used to go there.

The idea to relocate to Finland was presented by my informants as an automatic decision, almost a nondecision. Moreover, when answering the question of how they see the future, most of them point to the possibility of further relocations. At the same time, they realize that further relocation is inconsistent with their general satisfaction with life in Finland. They tend to talk about having well-established comfortable routines, if not about having put down roots in their new country. At the same time, many speak about their desire to move to Sweden in particular: “Well, I was thinking about Sweden. If there is any sense in planning while I am here? In the next few years while I am here I will not get citizenship [EU citizenship is often seen as a precondition to further relocation]” (Alexander). Paradoxically, the decisive issue in this choice was that Sweden was perceived as nearly identical to Finland. Thus, the value of further relocation was not perceived in terms of the country of destination but in terms of the process of mobility itself. For these people, the norm of both future career and personal development is in one way or another seen in terms of spatial mobility, be it realized or not.

The way my informants made sense of their life trajectories raises the issue of whether being dynamic is a modus vivendi—a norm for a specific
group, in this case a professional one. It would be an overstatement, however, to say that we are dealing with a nomadic tribe. While spatial mobility is definitely perceived as the norm, we must not confuse presentation and reality. Whether the people I talked to will relocate in the future and whether they will do so to Sweden is beyond the scope of this paper. What is interesting is the fact that they prefer to see spatial mobility as an attractive model according to which they are eager to build their professional life narratives.

STORIES OF RELOCATION: CHOSEN TACTICS AND TAKEN OPPORTUNITIES

While my informants perceive the decision to migrate as “natural” or even inevitable, the question remains as to why they chose Finland? They present several typical routes of how they ended up in Finland. Only one person made a strategic, unequivocal decision to relocate to this country. Other narrators present their experience as ad hoc (de Certeau 1984). Some migrated via student exchange programs; some benefited from having contacts with earlier migrants to Finland; some simply searched online for job opportunities abroad and were interested in large Finnish IT companies. Most importantly, they view any opportunity that they took advantage of as something acceptable, reasonable, and manageable.

One of my initial hypotheses was that my informants would see Russia as a country that stimulates the exodus of highly skilled professionals. Moreover, one would expect that Russian culture’s inclination toward a “genre of lamentation” (Ries 1997) would produce a whole range of critical attitudes toward the country of origin, especially from the political and social standpoint. Surprisingly, none of my interlocutors were explicitly or persistently critical of Russian politics, and none considers migration as a forced decision or escape. They do, however, criticize the Russian state for its tendency to underestimate or even neglect the role and the work of well-educated and highly qualified professionals like engineers and scientists: “Forget politics, indeed! What is important is the Gini index. And . . . economics. Well, politics, as we all know, is a servant of economics. Well, in the Russian economy, engineering and the engineering profession—no one needs them, to my mind” (Vladimir, aged thirty-two, Helsinki).

When asked whether he found something dissatisfying about Russia in deciding to emigrate, one of my informants (who used a student exchange program to relocate to Finland) replied:
Far from being unacceptable! It is hard to tell that something was unacceptable at that moment. Because I did not know that it could be different. I mostly was curious, what is it like when it is different? This is more curiosity . . . , a desire to try something else, more than a purposeful undertaking. (Yaroslav, aged thirty-two, Finland, France)

These quotes show that some of my informants have neither a negative attitude toward Russia nor particular feelings toward Finland as a host country. Rather than push or pull factors, “curiosity” or the desire for a “new experience” (that is, mobility in and of itself) were the major factors driving their decisions to migrate.

Another hypothesis suggested by the interview data concerned the economic nature of migration. The Russian-speaking ICT professionals whom I interviewed moved to Finland mostly from large cities such as Saint Petersburg or Moscow, where software engineers are among the top-paid professional groups. Some, in fact, present their migration to Finland as a deterioration of their household’s economic position: “On the one hand, objectively the correlation between income and spending—I have even lost a bit. Firstly, because of taxation. Secondly, the housing is very expensive. And I used to have an apartment over there [in Russia]” (Alexander).

Probably the dominant reason for migration choice is the idea of chance or coincidence that decided the future. My informants do not in any way represent themselves as risk takers or adventurers, but narrate their migration to Finland as unplanned and unarranged: “Well, I was not purposefully searching for something in order to leave. But when I saw that option, it occurred to me: ‘Why not?!’” (Yaroslav). The way they portray their choice of Finland fits their attitudes to spatial mobility as natural and unproblematic—a sentiment strengthened by the fact that the path between Russia and Finland is well trodden:

To speak of moving to Helsinki, everything is easier, that is, a lot of Russians live here. The man from whom I got a position, he was a Russian who worked for that company. So they [Finns] are friendlier toward Russians and . . . the relocation in this respect is easier. You can ask about all the details. (Andrey, aged thirty, Helsinki)

Preexisting experience and connections mattered:

And . . . there was a need to go international, to go somewhere. I just sent around my cv, and as a result I got two options: either to this country [Fin-
land] or to Sweden. Well, this country was the easy choice. I knew some people here and so forth. (Fedor, aged thirty-two, Helsinki)

The presence of Finland in both the cultural imaginary and real-life experience was particularly true for those Russian ICT professionals who spent time in the Russian Northwest. Unlike those who come to Finland from elsewhere (Forsander and Raunio 2009) and have only a vague image of the country, Russians have their own distinct perception of the neighboring state.

IMAGINING FINLAND: NARRATIVES OF COMFORT

My informants’ general feeling about Finland is captured by the term “comfort,” which includes pragmatism, predictability, safety, transparency, equality, the human-friendly organization of space, and closeness to nature. Sometimes they contrast these features with their experience in Russia or other countries; sometimes they find these features important irrespective of any comparison. One of their narrative tactics is to present Russian urban life in a dark light, thereby casting Finland in brighter colors and legitimizing their decision to migrate. The Russian cities from which they have relocated are usually depicted as dangerous and disorganized spaces:

In Russia, when you are leaving home: you open the door and close the door. That is it. Home is left behind. It is already some kind of border crossing, and then you have to . . . watch out and so on. Here, when you leave home, you still feel at home. That means there is no feeling that beyond the doorsteps an alien territory begins. (Alexander)

When talking about Finland, my subjects also contrast it to the US, which they depict as far away, unpredictable, full of stress and challenges, and generally speaking “uncomfortable.” While Finland seems to be a “safe choice,” the US is a risky one. Though some of my informants have no experience of the US whatsoever, they received vivid images of the country from stories told by colleagues and friends. It is not only the American culture that they find unattractive but also the work ethic: “It is far away and another culture. That is drastically other. It is very different from not only Russian, but European [culture], in terms of work” (Yaroslav). My informants were discouraged by the heavy workload and competitiveness of the American workplace, together with the lack of social security and comfortable work conditions.
Most of the interviewees migrated to Finland with their spouses and often with their children, and greatly value the family-friendly environment. They also emphasize Finland’s geographical proximity to Russia as making it possible to remain in touch with their extended families. One of my informants finds the idea of returning to Russia problematic precisely because of a lack of suitable family infrastructure:

If we arrive in Russia: shortly thereafter we will have to find a place to live, arrange a kindergarten and school for the children, yes . . . and to have a possibility to drive from work to home via kindergarten and school. I think that in Russia this will be hard to organize. That is, firstly, all the waiting lists for kindergartens and schools, for the decent ones. Moreover . . . naturally, more likely, one’s job will be only in big cities, i.e., in Moscow, Saint Petersburg. I absolutely do not want to go to the big cities. (Yaroslav).

As in other interviews, what we see here is a statement of lifestyle preferences, not just concerns about social infrastructure and childcare systems.

Finland is seen as an environment that provides all the necessary conditions of what is perceived by my subjects to be a good life: medium-sized cities, accessibility of the outdoors for sports, and a life that is better attuned with nature. Their view of the Finnish public transportation system captures some of this; most of my interviewees are fascinated by it. At first the ubiquity of this topic seemed a bit strange, but I later understood that to them the Finnish public transportation system is a symbol of the predictability, reliability, rationality, and safety they so much value:

From home to work I was taking a bus. There was a highway and there was not really a traffic jam on this highway but rather heavy traffic, but, however, there was a bus lane and the bus flew down the highway at eighty kilometers per hour. All the distances . . . everything is very close. In Saint Petersburg, I remember, I always was adding something [extra time] to arrive somewhere; all in all, an hour and a half. Because all of this added up, you will get the eventual feeling of discomfort. (Yaroslav)

In fact, this reclamation of time and the attraction of predictability is not simply a matter of comfort but a desire to have agency; that is to say, to act according to one’s own will and to control one’s own time. Because Russian big cities make people dependent on external structures, they strip inhabitants of their agency, “instituting uncertainty as a rule” (Verdery 1996, 54).

For my informants, comfort, understood in a very particular way, is one of the main reasons to stay in Finland. Interestingly, there is a noticeable
uniformity of images and notions that they associate with “comfort,” suggesting that despite the lack of a traditional community or diasporic entity connecting my subjects, there is a set of shared values and beliefs. The case of Kazan IT specialists (Kontareva, this volume) reveals a shared pattern, as people who live and work in Kazan hold the same infrastructural and lifestyle preferences: they value a medium-sized city with a bicycle-friendly environment, and proximity to nature impossible to find in large Russian cities.

SELF-PRESENTATION: PRESENTING WORK, PRESENTING THE COUNTRY

There are parallels in the ways people talk about their work and self. Sherry Turkle (2005, 102) has argued that “programming style is an expression of personality style,” and that programmers could be distinguished between the “safe” or “racing-car” types: one type is keen on predictability, safety, and control while the other is attracted to challenges and prefers going to extremes. One could draw an analogy between Turkle’s findings and the patterns I see in Russian ICT professionals’ narratives of work ethic and their image of Finland. In particular, those who relocated to Finland can be presented as belonging to the “safe” group. Also, there is an intuitive feeling that the two categories identified by Turkle may also correspond to two different work ethic paradigms—one that praises risky behavior and individual initiative (i.e., “capitalism”) and the other more appreciative of safety and cooperation (namely, “socialism”). It seems fair to say that Russian ICT specialists in Finland gravitate toward the “socialist” end of the spectrum.

The way Russian ICT professionals talk about work and work ethics correlates with the way they talk about Finland. They hardly ever use such categories as career growth, promotion, or search for profit: “It is my firm decision: if my goal was to earn money as much as possible, to do it in Russia is far easier than in Finland” (Vladimir). Most of them seem more interested in working for a company or on a project that is well organized, where one can measure efficiency and see results. This apparent disinterest in money coupled with an interest in productivity and creativity resonates with what Pekka Himanen (2001) sees as a key attribute of the new “hacker ethic”; however, it is also more in tune with social-democratic norms than with the libertarian values and norms Himanen ascribes to hackers. My subjects all display this same moderate interest in financial benefits combined with an appreciation of doing something socially useful. For them, Finnish society is generally calm and welfare oriented: “A small country without big ambitions.”
That, according to me, creates a way for it to treat its citizens with more concern” (Yaroslav).

The Russian ICT professionals in Finland occupy very different positions within the various branches of the IT industry; nevertheless, they see work in the IT sector as something that predetermines their everyday life in general. When talking about their life in their new country they suggest that Finland matches their “geekiness”—the “root” of their chosen profession. While they are integrated into Finnish society mostly through their work (Trux 2010), Russian ICT professionals prefer to live rather “asocial” lives, as several of them put it. Most claim that they do not go out or socialize outside the office and prefer to deal with computers rather than human beings. As Alexander says: “I work at the office, then come home and do something for myself at home. The only difference is the computer I use and what I use it for.” Most other Russian ICT professionals have told me that they appreciate the Finnish culture of noninterference and privacy, which does not push them to communicate with the outside world when they do not wish to and gives them space to concentrate on what they like to do: programming.

In Lifestyle Migration, Benson and O’Reilly (2009) argue that those who relocate in search of a better life usually try to find a better work/family balance. Unlike the Silicon Valley employment model (English-Lueck 2002), where work penetrates all life spheres, the work/family balance in Helsinki is of a different nature. My informants appreciate the fact that in Finland they have more time for both their family and themselves. One interviewee summarized this quite straightforwardly:

Well, this is one of the reasons why I do not want to go back to Russia. Because here it is easier to find a balance, in Europe [talking about both Finland and France]. That is why I do not want to go, let’s say, to the US. Because here it is easier to find a balance between life and work. Because here it is easier with working hours. (Yaroslav)

Those Russian speakers who moved to Finland present their preferred lifestyle as family oriented, and believe in traditional clear-cut boundaries between work and personal life. The postindustrial “flexibility” of working hours that is part of “hacker ethics” (Himanen 2001, 20) is foreign to them.

The absence of risk is another key element of my subjects’ narratives. They do nothing to hide the fact that one of their main incentives for moving to Finland is their image of the country as a “safe option.” Despite their stated desire to work for a startup or launch their own project, my informants mostly work for big and middle-size companies (as with the Boston
“upper-middle tech” case; West, this volume). They admit this contradiction but do not dare to take a risk:

Well, maybe I am making mistake here, but I somehow do not like to take risks. And because of this I am very critical of [business] ideas. And I, of course, had several [business] ideas. But I was so critical of them. Maybe, in vain, maybe I should have done something. (Vladimir)

My informants do not represent themselves as Schumpeterian entrepreneurs (Schumpeter 1911) or the neoliberal version of that. They do not have a gambler-like attitude toward risk; instead, they fit the profile of the “safe-type” programmer presented by Turkle (2005). But being risk averse does not mean being unappreciative of the quality and professionality of one’s work, something they explicitly admire about the Finns:

Although they are more relaxed, at the same time they are more hardworking. That means they have a desire to get results. They have an interest not only in earning money, but in somehow feeling that they managed to complete their task well. (Andrey)

My interviewees do not see Finland’s high taxes as a burden but as a just arrangement for the common good: “Yes, I pay huge taxes. . . . If someone for some reason was taken ill or something else, lost his job, the state supports these people. Partly from my taxes. But I am all for it” (Vladimir). As illustrated by their apparent disinterest in professional promotion and managerial positions, most of the programmers support the idea of equality and economic redistribution. Their attitude toward equality and redistribution both at work and in society at large stands in opposition to capitalistic values of individual profit. Due to the relative social equality in Finland, my subjects find a mental comfort that, while resonating with their search for a better life, also correlates with their more general idea of social justice:

Well . . . Finland is a more comfortable place, I would say. Here the standard of living is higher. In California you can find a very high standard of living, but at the same time you will be going to work every day and see people with not that high a living standard. This makes your experience of being in a country slightly different. Meaning when you see homeless people on the streets, standing at an intersection with little signs. (Konstantin, aged thirty-six, Helsinki)

Russian ICT professionals in Finland tend to value collectivity, cooperation, and a creative spirit at work and in daily life. However, some apparent
tensions can be glimpsed in their commitments: they privilege collective values in comparison with individual achievements but also tend to praise noninterference and the reserved nature of Finnish society. What they value in both the workplace and Finnish society is the opportunity to peacefully coexist according to well-established and observed rules. “Finns are much more, let’s say, formal. I do not mean [this negatively]. . . . Let’s say . . . that means that they obey the rules more strictly” (Yaroslav). And at the same time, Finnish society provides a certain degree of freedom, which is so necessary for my subjects: “That means no one breathes down your neck and so forth. There is more respect for private space at your office” (Andrey). Or, as another informant explains: “Finns are very relaxed. They do not bother you, they do not control you like Americans or Russians. They presuppose that you will be productive without anyone hurrying you” (Nikolay). This interesting combination of autonomy and independence while voluntarily following rules resonates deeply with my subjects’ own values, tending to present those features of their new place of work and residence that resonate with their understandings of a proper society—a proper programmer and a proper self. In doing so, they implicitly or explicitly compare Finland and their new life with two other sites: their previous life in Russia and the imaginary (potential) experience of life and work in the US.

CONCLUSION

Unlike other chapters in this volume that mostly depict migration trajectories, this chapter has looked at the migration narratives and strategies of self-presentation of Russian ICT professionals in Finland. While it is not possible to argue that my subjects moved to and stayed in Finland because of particular values and lifestyles, these values and lifestyles did become tools and sources for self-explanation and making sense of their own experience in a certain locality. Such narratives are particularly important to ICT specialists who, because of their high level of potential mobility, face the question of whether they should either settle or continue to relocate, and why. In the situation of migration, self-assemblage by making sense of a new milieu becomes especially clear with the appearance of new frontiers for identity re-creation (Barth 1969).

One can paint a rough portrait of my subjects’ shared traits. Those Russian-speaking ICT specialists in Finland with whom I talked are pragmatic and moderate; they prefer predictability and safety to risk and uncertainty; and they are team players with larger society-oriented goals. At the same
time, they withdraw from the larger society and are bounded by their networks; they value freedom but are eager to play by the rules. In their lifestyle preferences, they appreciate nature and seek a mixture of urban comfort and rural dwelling. Though their narratives are centered around work and professional issues, they emphasize family and define personal comfort from the perspective of a family man.

Surprisingly, identity building and value creation that my subjects demonstrate are similar to those described in the chapters dedicated to Jewish IT workers from the USSR/Russia who migrated to Boston and Israel (West, this volume; Fedorova on Israel, this volume). Those cases show migration flows that occurred earlier and can thus be more directly explained by the legacy of the Soviet work context and values. However, most of my subjects experienced adulthood in the context of post-Soviet Russia. To my mind, my subjects show not just a simple replication of Soviet practices and beliefs, but more so a particular set of values and lifestyles that can be interpreted as an alternative to the Silicon Valley model of technical entrepreneurship. In this way my study not only explains the Russian ICT case but also casts lights on a global trend among ICT professionals.

EPILOGUE

Recently I attended a conference on applied anthropology in Tartu, Estonia. One of the keynote speakers was a representative of local business, a successful IT entrepreneur from Estonia who now lives and works in Silicon Valley. In his speech, he presented a new platform that his team has been developing. This was a matchmaking site to help talent (mostly highly skilled IT professionals) find a country of possible migration. By way of an algorithm he had developed based on a formalized survey, he claimed that he could find a perfect match between a professional’s preferences and the migration country’s amenities. When I saw the mockup version of the platform I began to doubt the success of the venture. The list of criteria to choose from was not only limited to ten to twenty options based on the “rational choice” assumption of the platform’s developer, but was also strongly dominated by the spirit of the Silicon Valley model. I would argue based on my research that the platform was built on two incorrect assumptions: First, that ICT professionals when faced with migration prospects make rational decisions based on clear-cut preferences they have before relocation. Second, that most of them value a particular lifestyle and share an ethic close to that of the Silicon Valley tech capitalism model. On the contrary, I would argue that dis-
covery and negotiation of an ICT migrant’s preferences happens constantly and often as a result of the migration process. Moreover, the entrepreneurial capitalism of Silicon Valley is not the only game in town. Based on the cases presented in this volume, I would offer at least two more ideal type models: one that I would call “corporate capitalist” (risk averse and profit oriented) represented by the Boston case of “upper-middle tech” (West, this volume), and another I would call “socialist” (risk averse and social justice oriented) represented in the case of migration to Finland depicted in this chapter.

NOTES

1. Of the total number of people who migrated to Finland in 2011, 18.6 percent came from Estonia and 16.2 percent from Russia (Eurostat 2012).
2. According to the “Global Information Technology Report 2014” provided by World Economic Forum (2014, 7): “Finland tops the rankings with a strong performance across the board. It ranks 1st in the readiness subindex thanks to an outstanding digital ICT infrastructure—the best in the world—and 2nd in both the usage and impact subindexes, with more than 90 percent of its population using the Internet and high levels of technological and non-technological innovation.”
3. All interviews with IT workers were conducted in Russian and translated by the author.
4. Paradoxically, however, the term “lifestyle migrant” is used most often to describe the relocation of a nonworking population.
6. LinkedIn is an international social network that allows professionals to take advantage of the global labor market.
7. It is important to note that most of the interviews were conducted before Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. I believe that interviews conducted after the annexation of Crimea would have been much more critical and politicized than the narratives I collected.
8. According to most recent surveys conducted in large Russian cities, ICT workers (together with lawyers, sales directors, and chief accountants) are among the highest-paid professional groups.
9. These characteristics partly correlate with what Nielsen (Нильсен 2004) presents as the “limbo state” of Russia during the late Soviet period.
10. The stunning unanimity of their views about Finland and much else remains puzzling. This is not, I believe, a consensus that can be traced back to a single factor: be it Russian descent, age, or professional background. It is rather a mixture of all these and the shared experience of migration that makes their narratives resemble one another. My subjects are not inherently identical at the start, but become more so as they go through similar experiences and fashion similar
narratives in order to make sense of their new predicament and self. I would also argue that it is the very process of narrativization of their experiences in certain circumstances that makes the stories resemble one another. Life narratives are not a string of autobiographical facts but a genre, a mode of narrating the self to construct one. In this case, my subjects’ remarkably homogeneous narratives may have also been shaped in response to the narrative genre I offered them—that of the biographical interview—which may have directed them to come up with a more or less coherent story of their migration experience.

REFERENCES


