EMIGRATION OF RUSSIAN PENSIONERS TO VIETNAM (AND OTHER COUNTRIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA)[1]

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Abstract. This article analyzes the migration of elderly Russians to Vietnam (in comparison with other countries in Southeast Asia). The migration of the social group takes place against the background of a change in the age structure of the population in Russia and the world, which implies a greater activity of the older generation, including in the context of migration. The paper highlights various factors of migration in old age: demographic, social, economic, regional-climatic. Official statistics allow us to describe the growing emigration of the Russian older generation to Vietnam, where 318 senior citizens officially emigrated in 2011-2021. It is noted that during the pandemic, Vietnam turned out to be an attractive place for elderly Russian migrants. State statistics do not take into account forms of temporary migration, therefore, using a two-stage content analysis of the social network service "Odnoklassniki", the number of accounts of elderly Russian speakers in Southeast Asia was revealed: the most frequent users were in Thailand, then in Vietnam and Singapore. The analysis of cases made it possible to identify several models of migration and adaptation of elderly Russian speakers in Vietnam: the "Tourism" model (transitional), "Family", "Active lifestyle", "Treatment". Additionally, the legal aspects of the elderly moving to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries are analyzed. The authors come to the conclusion that the "retirement visa" does not have a decisive impact on the migration of the elderly, since, for example, Vietnam is one of the main destinations for the migration of elderly Russians, while not providing them with special conditions. The reason is the high financial requirements for candidates to acquire a "retirement visa" (in countries where such a visa is granted) and the lack of fundamental benefits from obtaining such an opportunity.

Key words: international migration, population aging, pensioners, older generation, emigration risks, Southeast Asia, elderly people, migration factors, adaptation models, retirement visa.

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Introduction

As evidenced by the UN data, we see the role of the older generation increasing: by the middle of the XXI century there will be an almost twofold increase in the number of the elderly[4]. Society is entering an era of active longevity, bringing with it a specific impact on the migration of the elderly.

According to the UN, there were 280.6 million migrants in 2020, with 48.2 million of them over the age of 60 (and the number of elderly migrants has doubled in the past 30 years)[5]. Moreover, migration of this social group has regional specifics: representatives of older age move mainly to Europe and North America, accounting for 2/3 of migrants of older age in 2020 (32.4 million people)[6]. At the same time, the introduction of "retirement visas" is gaining popularity, having been actively offered in a number of Southeast Asian countries (Thailand[7], Philippines[8], Malaysia[9] etc.), thus considering the elderly as one of the main target groups. In this context, Vietnam occupies a special position, as it is among the top 5 destinations for emigration of the working-age Russians[10], leading then to the migration of their parents (the older generation). It is the desire to reunite with relatives that is identified as one of the main reasons for international migration at an older age [Zaiceva 2014].

Literature review

Old-age migration is an understudied socio-demographic process in Russia. Due to the underestimation of the role of international migration of pensioners in the formation of the demographic structure of the country's population, this aspect is practically not touched upon in the works of Russian scientists. At the same time, some works are devoted to internal migration of pensioners [Gridasov et al. 2011; Karachurina, Ivanova 2019], and this aspect is also touched upon in the study of age differentiation of migration [Efremov 2014; Mkrtchyan 2015]. There are several classical and contemporary approaches to international migration in old age in the Western literature (see for details [Litwak Longino 1987; Greenwood 2014; Nioradze 2021]), however, in this article we focus on the problem of migration in the context of Vietnam and other South-East Asian countries.

Works by Russian and Vietnamese scholars cover aspects of migration from Vietnam to Russia: historical and contemporary features of migration processes between the two countries [Mazyrin 2004; Pismennaya 2015], studies of assimilation of Vietnamese communities [Dinh Ha My 2015; Tuzova 2019], the role of the Vietnamese diaspora for bilateral relations [Ryazantsev et al. 2022], the attractiveness of certain regions of Russia for Vietnamese [Khramova, Manshin, Vu Quoc Hu 2021], and the structure of remittances of Vietnamese migrants (in the world at large) [Nguyen Dac Hung 2022]. In the context of this article, let us consider studies of emigration from Russia to Vietnam.

The works of Russian scientists related to the study of the migration of Russians to the countries of Southeast Asia in general form a separate line of research. For example, one of the studies

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[4] World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights. New York, 2019. P. 18

[5] United Nations. Retrieved on 22.04.2021 from URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock

[6] Ibid.

[7] Embassy of the Kingdom of Thailand. Retrieved on 07.10.2021 from URL: https://clck.ru/Y4VnT.

[8] Department of Tourism of the Republic of the Philippines. Retrieved on 07.10.2021 from URL: https://pra.gov.ph/srrv

[9] Embassy of Malaysia in the Russian Federation. Retrieved on 07.10.2021 from URL: https://www.kln.gov.my/web/rus_moscow/requirement_foreigner

[10] Federal State Statistics Service. Retrieved on 30.04.2021 from URL: https://gks.ru/bgd/regl/b20_107/IssWWW.exe/Stg/2-12.xlsx

revealed the approximate number of Russians in this region, as well as highlighted the main trends of emigration to Southeast Asia and assessed the economic activity of Russian-speaking migrants in this region [Ryazantsev 2017]. The sociological research allowed us to identify the following flows of Russian-speaking migrants: 1) purposeful move to SEA, 2) temporary migration (including labor), and 3) marriage with a resident of SEA [Ryazantsev et al. 2017]. Another study, based on the analysis of social networks, identified the main factors of attraction of Russian labor migrants to Vietnam: favorable climate, low cost of living, opportunity to travel, opportunity to live in fundamentally new conditions [Maksimova, Rzhevskaya, Frolova 2016]. The presented studies describe in detail the situation of Russian-speaking migrants in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, almost without touching on the age cut.

Migration factors of elderly Russians

The elderly is a specific socio-demographic group that tends to grow numerically. In 2021 the share of the elderly[11] reached 26.6% (38.9 million people) of the total age structure of the country, increasing by 4.4% over 11 years (2010-2021[12]. The aging of the Russian population leads to an increase in the activity of the elderly in various spheres of life, including migration. Thus, the first factor of elderly migration is ***demographic***.

The ***social*** factor is reflected by the changed sociocultural and legal conditions. Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the USSR led, in addition to severe negative consequences, to the abolition of the "iron curtain" and the opening of borders. As a result, the elderly gained the right to carry out external migration on a permanent (with a change of residence) or temporary basis ("wintering" in a more comfortable climate, visiting previously emigrated children, etc.).).

The ***economic opportunities*** are the third factor in elderly migration. Transportation costs, renting or buying a home, visas, and living arrangements require a sufficient level of wealth or financial support from children.

Finally, the ***regional-climatic*** factor contributes greatly to the emigration to Southeast Asia of people from Siberia and the Far East. This is due, firstly, to the great distance from European countries. Secondly, there is an interest in the year-round warm climate. Thirdly, the inhabitants of the Far East are mentally close to the cultures of the East as a whole (unlike, for example, the inhabitants of the European part of Russia).

Information sources

The main statistical source is Rosstat (Federal State Statistics Service, Russia) data providing the distribution of pensioners by country of emigration. However, the Rosstat (FSSS) information is based on de-registration records. Consequently, this is only the tip of the iceberg due to the existence of many forms of temporary migration that do not lend themselves to official records[13]. The Russian Pension Fund is another source of data on Russian elderly migrants, but they do not have a country distribution. At the same time, international statistical agencies (UN, IOM) allow us to estimate the number of migrants to SEA countries, but it is not possible to identify the share of elderly migrants from a particular country of origin (Russia). Thus, the lack of statistical data required the use of different methods to estimate the extent of migration of elderly Russians to SEA countries.

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[11] Within the previous retirement age limits: men 60 and over, women 55 and over.
[12] Demographic Yearbook of Russia. 2021: Stat. coll. Rosstat. M., 2021. P. 20-21.
[13] Russia in Figures. 2020: Brief statistical collection. Rosstat-M., 2020. P. 74.

Methodology

First, the content analysis method of the Odnoklassniki social network (16-17 September 2021) was used, consisting of two phases:

I)   *Formal selection* of men over 61 and women over 56, and region of residence – SEA countries (excluding East Timor). An additional filter is the age of no more than 85 years old (due to the large number of fake accounts). In the first phase, 86,500 accounts were eligible.

II)   *Qualitative selection* of identified accounts: 1) Presence of a relevant avatar, 2) First name, last name, 3) Russian name (South Asian, European, etc. are excluded), 4) Exclusion of repeated accounts. According to the results of the selection in the second stage, 807 accounts met the conditions.

We do not refer the analysed social network accounts to Russians, but to Russian-speaking Odnoklassniki users, as "...there is no single and universal concept that includes the totality and diversity of natives of Russia and people who speak Russian" [Ryazantsev 2018: 52].

As an additional research method, case studies were analysed – the stories of elderly Russians who had moved to Vietnam. A total of two Internet sites, Wonder (2016)[14] and TV Channel 360 (2018)[15], as well as two issues of the video blog were selected (2020-2021)[16],[17].

Main results

Migration of Russian pensioners to Vietnam and other SEA countries

The official data (Rosstat) suggests that 318 people over working age migrated to Vietnam between 2011 and 2021 (Fig.1). Comparing the dynamics of elderly migration to Vietnam, elderly migration in general and migration of all age groups in the 'pandemic' year 2020, a paradox emerges. Older migration to Viet Nam follows the migration pattern of younger generations: there has been a significant increase in the number of departures to Viet Nam, in spite of a decrease in migration of older people in general. Moreover, as Figure 1 shows, this indicator has doubled.
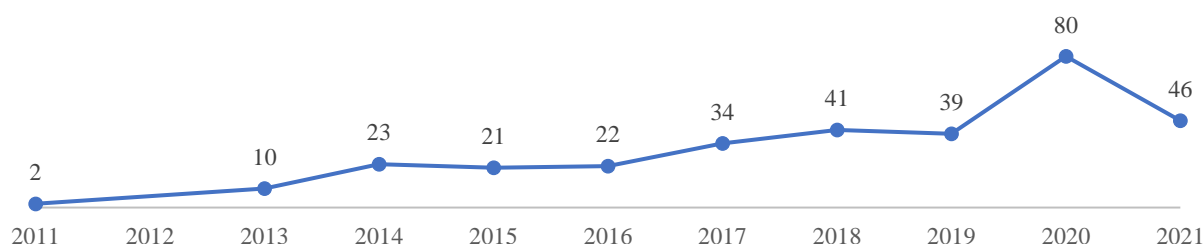

Fig. 1. Dynamics of the number of elderly migrants who left Russia for Vietnam (2011-2021). *Source:* Rosstat (FSSS)[18]. *Note:* Data for 2012 are not available

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[14]Wonderzine Internet edition. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/life/217377-go-vietnam

[15] 360tv.ru online edition. Retrieved on: 08.10.2021 from URL: https://360tv.ru/news/mir/pensionnyj-daunshifting-pozhilye-rossijane-rasskazali-o-zhizni-na-aziatskih-kurortah

[16]Alexey Bessmertny's YouTube video blog. 2020. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFNLelUjHIM

[17]Alexey Bessmertny's YouTube video blog. 2021. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0sD4aQsrPY&t=522s

[18]Federal State Statistics Service. Retrieved on 17.09.2021 from URL: https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/q9wFke4y/bul-migr20.xlsx

Such a dramatic increase in emigration to Vietnam in 2020 can be attributed to the following reasons. First, the statistics are distorted by reverse migration – the return of Vietnamese families to their home country in the context of pandemic. This assumption is confirmed by the return migration rate as early as 2021, which was much less related to lockdowns and other anticoronavirus restrictions in Russia. Secondly, the relocation of older Russians to a more prosperous climate in terms of self-isolation. This is illustrated by data on immigration from Vietnam to Russia in contrast: the number of elderly immigrants from Vietnam to Russia in 2020 did not change, i.e. the onset of the pandemic did not affect the decision of Russian pensioners living in Vietnam to experience a pandemic in a foreign country. Thus, this confirms the hypothesis of Russian elderly migrants' interest in Vietnam as a place to live comfortably in the face of the pandemic (Fig. 2).

In retrospect, however, in 2011-2021 there was a steady increase in the interest of elderly migrants in Vietnam, even in official terms (not taking into account latent forms of migration – e.g. "wintering").

Fig. 2. Russian pensioner in Vietnam. *Source:* online edition "360tv.ru"

Content analysis of the Odnoklassniki social network

Due to the limited amount of statistical data, a quantitative content analysis of the Odnoklassniki social network was conducted. At the first stage of the analysis, the results indicated 86,500 accounts of Russian-speaking people in Southeast Asia. However, the large number of false accounts with deliberately irrelevant information required a qualitative selection of the resulting units. In addition, there was an imbalance in the gender structure: men outnumbered women by two times.

The second stage of the content analysis allowed us to clarify the number of accounts of Russian-speaking seniors in Southeast Asia (Table 1). Among Southeast Asian regions, Thailand (278 accounts), Vietnam (166 accounts) and Singapore (146 accounts) are the most popular places to live. These results correlate indirectly with another study where Thailand and Vietnam are the countries with the largest number of migrant Russians [Ryazantsev 2017: 71].

Table 1. **Distribution of the number of users over the working age living in Southeast Asia[19] (data from Odnoklassniki's content analysis), account**

	Total, people.	**Men**	**Women**
SEA countries	807	238	569
Thailand	278	45	233
Vietnam	166	66	100
Singapore	146	47	99

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[19] No data is available for East Timor, so this country is not included in the table.

Philippines	78	24	54
Malaysia	38	13	25
Cambodia	30	14	16
Indonesia	22	5	17
Myanmar	18	8	10
Laos	18	10	8
Brunei	13	6	7

Source: compiled by the authors

Migration and adaptation models of Russian pensioners in Vietnam

Analysis of the Internet press has revealed five cases – stories of elderly Russians who have moved to Vietnam. On this basis, the following adaptation models are identified:

I. Tourism Model. Vietnam is not the migrant's country of residence, but the migrant regularly travels around the world (Vietnam, Thailand, Czech Republic, Germany, etc.)[20]. This model can only tentatively be classified as "migration", but studies on emigration to Southeast Asia show that tourism (previous tourist experience of staying in a given country) is one of the key drivers of future migration decisions [Ryazantsev 2017: 70; Dan Nguyen Anh et al. 2022].

II. Family Model. Relocation is carried out to their children who have settled in the new country. Sources of income are income from rental housing in Russia. Gradual integration is possible – getting a job in a local travel agency, founding their own excursion office, income from fishing and gastronomic activities[21],[22].

III. Active Lifestyle Model. A hobby for windsurfing brings migrant spouses to Vietnam. The integration goes very well: a medical degree allows one to get a job in a local clinic even without knowing the Vietnamese language. Later, the migrant sets up his own business: a windsurfing station, turning the hobby into a source of income[23] (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Russian pensioners in Vietnam. *Source:* online edition "360tv.ru"

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[20] 360tv.ru online edition. 2018. Retrieved on: 08.10.2021from URL: https://360tv.ru/news/mir/pensionnyj-daunshifting-pozhilye-rossijane-rasskazali-o-zhizni-na-aziatskih-kurortah/

[21] Ibid.

[22] Wonderzine online edition. 2016. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/life/217377-go-vietnam

[23] 360tv.ru online edition. 2018. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://360tv.ru/news/mir/pensionnyj-daunshifting-pozhilye-rossijane-rasskazali-o-zhizni-na-aziatskih-kurortah

IV. Treatment Model. The migrant spouse moves for medical treatment at the end of her or his working life due to health problems, then decides to stay. Source of income: increased ("northern"[24]) pension[25].

The models presented are not intended to be exhaustive of patterns of migration and adaptation of older Russians to SEA (for example, there is no information about those older migrants who have failed to adapt to new conditions). In addition, there is hypothetically another pattern – the content analysis repeatedly captures pictures of elderly Russians dressed in naval suits. Elderly migration may be related to labor activity, during or after the end of which older people decide to stay in the same region where they worked or continue working ("temporary labor migration tends to turn into permanent migration: labor migrants eventually settle in the host countries") [Ryazantsev 2017: 69-70].

Legal conditions for migration of elderly Russians to Vietnam and other SEA countries

An additional factor in elderly migration is the barriers to immigration in a given state. In addition to general conditions for entry into a country, some states offer special programmes that attract older migrants specifically. In this regard, information on opportunities for Russian pensioners to emigrate to various countries of South-East Asia is systematised. The analysis showed that "retirement visa" is available only in four countries (Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia) and, according to unofficial information, in Cambodia. At the same time, "retirement visas" are not available in Vietnam or Singapore (these are among the top 3 countries in terms of the number of Russian-speaking elderly people's accounts). Thus, the "retirement visa" is not a determining factor for the migration of elderly Russians. This is due, firstly, to high requirements for the financial solvency of the elderly and, secondly, to weak privileges for holders of exactly retirement visas rather than standard residence permits available to all age groups. At the same time, most countries (7 out of 11) have a visa-free regime facilitating visits to local resorts by Russian tourists[26].

Conclusions

International migration of elderly Russians to Vietnam is a growing process, although this form of migration is specific and not large-scale. The potential of the region (both Vietnam itself and other Southeast Asian countries) for the Russian older generation is not exhausted. First, the driver is the openness of visa regimes for Russian citizens (7 out of 11 countries) allowing short-term stays (from 14 to 30 days) without a visa. As the analysis of the cases and the findings of other studies confirm, it is the positive tourist experience that encourages further emigration to Vietnam. Second, Russians of working age are actively moving to Vietnam (among the top 5 destinations for international migration outside the CIS), which eventually facilitates the migration of their parents (pensioners) for family reunification and joint household management.

Data from Rosstat (FSSS) records elderly migration to Vietnam: during 2011-2021, 318 people over working age officially moved there, with the number of migrants steadily increasing. The results of Odnoklassniki's two-step content analysis show that Vietnam is in second place in terms of

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[24] According to Russian pension legislation, citizens living in the Far North and equivalent areas, as well as citizens who previously worked in such areas, regardless of their current place of residence, are entitled to an increase in the fixed payment to the insurance pension.

[25] Alexey Bessmertny's YouTube video blog. 2020. Retrieved on 08.10.2021 from URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFNLelUjHIM

[26] Consultant Plus. Retrieved on 07.10.2021 from URL: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_126897

the number of accounts in which users have marked one of the Southeast Asian countries as their place of residence (Thailand – 278 – ac., Vietnam – 166 ac.).

Analysis of visa regimes shows that special conditions for immigration of the elderly ("retirement visas") are of questionable value. The quantitative distribution of this category of migrants shows that the "retirement visa" does not play a significant role for their emigration. Thus, Vietnam is one of the most popular destinations for elderly Russian-speaking migrants despite the absence of a "retirement visa". This is due to the fact that in order to obtain a 'retirement visa' one must have a large capital and/or monthly income. As a result, it is more convenient to obtain entry permits available to tourists and migrants of all age categories.

The case study method was based on an analysis of the information space featuring pensioners living in Vietnam. The analysis of the cases revealed four models of migration and adaptation of elderly Russians in this country: "tourism" (transitional model), "family", "active lifestyle", and "medical treatment". The results show that in all the cases studied, tourism is a key factor in the decision to spend retirement life in the region. Subsequently, the onset of the pandemic has generally not changed the decision of pensioners to stay in Vietnam, which confirms that there is no change in the number of elderly immigrants from Vietnam (in contrast, emigration to Vietnam by Russian pensioners increased markedly in 2020).

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