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## The Bright Side of Brain Drain

By Konstantin Sonin

The Defense Ministry announced last Thursday that the number of universities and institutes certified to provide military training would be slashed from 229 to 30 by 2010. Such training has allowed graduates to avoid serving in the armed forces. As a result, tens of thousands of graduates each year will become available for the draft. Currently, there are 170,000 students undergoing training as reserve officers.

Whether or not this move will bolster the country's defensive capability is unclear. What's obvious is that exposure to the draft will give young people one more reason to emigrate. The real problems facing our country have to do precisely with education and the sciences, but that's a topic for another column. The brain drain is an extremely complex issue, so for today I will focus on the upside.

In recent years, the number of people departing this country for extended periods or for good has significantly decreased, but those who do leave are increasingly our best and brightest. It comes as no surprise that most of the talented young people who go on to seek their fortune abroad graduate from the top universities and institutes: the science departments at Moscow State University, the Moscow Physics Technology Institute (MFTI) or the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute (MIFI).

At the New Economic School, where I teach, some 20 percent of graduates go abroad each year to pursue graduate degrees. We graduate just 50 to 60 students per year, however, so we're really just a drop in the bucket. And of the roughly 140 students who have gone abroad over the last 12 years, 20 or so have already returned.

Young people who leave the country to pursue their careers are making a conscious choice, of course, so you could say that the total volume of happiness, factoring in both those who remain and those have departed, only increases as a result of emigration.

Admittedly, it's hard to derive much pleasure from someone else's happiness, especially for those who stay behind. But the brain drain also has a silver lining for people who are concerned about the greatness of the Russian state. The writers Vladimir Nabokov and Ivan Bunin, the linguist Roman Jakobson, the economist Alexander Gershenkron and Google co-founder Sergey Brin (not to mention all the hockey players) have done far more to improve Russia's image abroad than all the Stalins and Gorbachevs put together. Just imagine the contribution that our current university graduates will go on to make to the sciences worldwide.

Finally, I'd like to propose a purely economic argument that should appeal to readers who aren't terribly bothered about the welfare of others or about the Russian state. Young people who graduate from good schools and prestigious universities here at home and then choose to emigrate owe absolutely nothing to the rest of us who remain. On the contrary, they are subsidizing us by giving up their share of the national wealth -- the taxes and levies collected from oil and gas companies, for example.

In a country like Japan, the older generation may subsidize the young. In Russia, however, most revenue is generated in one way or another by the exploitation of our natural resources. When you think about it, young Russians may perhaps have a greater right to this revenue than someone who has been benefiting from it for decades. By choosing to emigrate, young people effectively pay for their schooling and their university training by foregoing the share of this revenue that is their birthright.

I'm not suggesting that we should not try to slow the brain drain. We should try to keep these young people at home by improving education and by developing an economic demand for well-educated workers. Attempting to strengthen the country's defensive capability at the expense of our brightest young people is not the answer, however.

And there's no reason to get angry at those who choose to leave. They don't owe us a thing.

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