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Studying Public Opinion Among Migrants: Challenges and Opportunities

Emil Kamalov and Ivetta Sergeeva (both European University Institute, Florence), Margarita Zavadskaya (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki), and Veronica Kostenko (Haifa)

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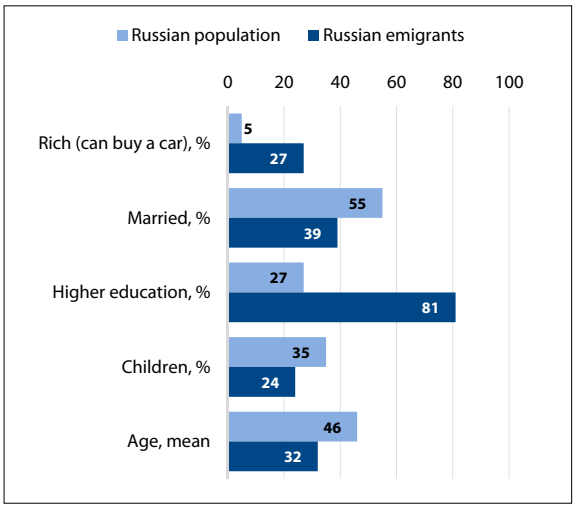
The number of Russian emigrants who fled the country after February 24, 2022, is difficult to estimate, but it is reported to be among the largest brain drains from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union (https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/25/how-the-war-in-ukraine-is-accelerating-russias-brain-drain). The current emigration wave is different from the general Russian population (see Figure 1), consisting mostly of representatives of the middle class, highly educated people with wide networks and more liberal political views than the average Russian (https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-2022-anti-war-exodus-the-attitudes-and-expectations-of-russian-migrants/).

Figure 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Emigrants and the Russian Population



Source: OutRush survey (https://outrush.io/), March 2022, N=1680, Levada, January 2022, N=1603.

Within the framework of the OutRush project (https://outrush.io),[1], we managed to complete two survey waves—in March and September 2022—that consisted of more than 3,000 respondents across more than a hundred countries recruited via online social networks.[2] In this research note, we seek to discuss the major methodological challenges of data collection and the biases that these may induce, as well as potential solutions.

Making the Most of Non-Representative Samples

Migrant communities are notoriously difficult to survey. Precise information on migrant populations is rarely available due to the dynamic nature of contemporary migration and the lack of comparability in registration procedures and migration legislature. Migrant populations are usually relatively small, making it hard for them to be well represented in national surveys. This problem may be overcome if up-to-date and high-quality census data are available, as this allows for more precise targeting. In the absence of such information, alternative sampling methods—such as snowballing or time-location—are expensive and unfeasible for simultaneous panel surveys in many countries. On the bright side, the new wave of Russian emigration has a number of features that allows it to sample a diverse stratum of respondents at relatively low cost, despite challenges that are not common for conventional surveys.

We recruited our respondents online through a variety of channels in Telegram messenger. Recent Russian emigrants use Telegram on a massive scale. Telegram recently became very popular in Russia; as of March 2022, it was even reported to be the most popular messenger in the country (https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2022/03/20/914320-telegram-oboshel-whatsapp). Telegram is popular primarily among young, educated urban dwellers (https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14555), a population that comprises the majority of new Russian emigrants. It is difficult to imagine an emigré who does not have Telegram installed on her smartphone.

Telegram is used by migrants to obtain up-to-date information about how to emigrate (https://www.inastana.kz/news/3468918/spisok-telegram-catov-dla-relokantov-iz-rossii), as well as how to move around and get settled in new locations. Within Russia, Telegram is largely used to track border restrictions (https://devby.io/

1 A research group conducting original surveys targeting people who left Russia after February 24, 2022. OutRush project is so far the only Russian migrants' panel survey: www.outrush.io/eng.

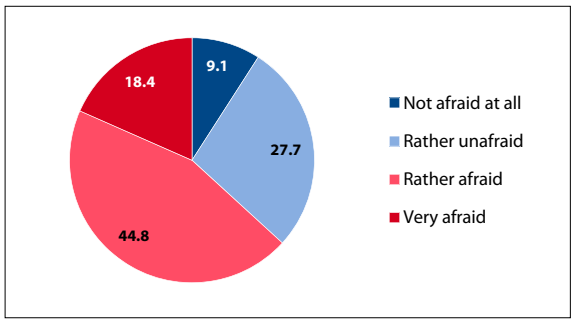
2 We cannot claim that our sample is representative of the general population of all Russian migrants who have left Russia since February 24, 2022. Due to a lack of information about the general population, it is impossible to create a probability sample, thus a convenience sample is the only option. Our sample is likely biased toward the younger and Internet-active population. We recruited people who have left Russia since February 24, 2022, including those who have already returned to Russia, as well as those who are leaving Russia soon. Only those who completed at least 50 percent of the questionnaire were included in the final analysis. We eliminated suspicious questionnaires, such as duplicates and those filled out too quickly.

news/tg-kanal-pogranichnyi-kontrol-gde-rasskazyvauto-prohozhdenii-granitsy-stal-liderom-po-kolichestvu-novyh-podpischikov-1663857738). The largest emigrant NGOs, migrant movements, and relocation groups deploy Telegram as their main medium of instant communication and coordination (eg., Kovcheg, Feminist Antiwar Resistance and Relocation Guide). Emigrants create shared chats on Telegram for each host society to support each other, as well as separate chats for each city and town where Russians arrive.[3]

Recruiting via Telegram cannot ensure a representative sample, but our recruiting strategies provide an adequate representation of the emigrants' universe. Post-stratification techniques may be applied to the data once statistics on migration flows in hosting societies are available in 2023.

When recruiting migrants fleeing authoritarian countries, one has to deal with respondents' suspicion of surveys. In authoritarian regimes, especially in wartime, people are afraid to give sincere answers or reluctant even to participate in any kind of survey (https://russianfield.com/beregiterossiy). Recent emigrants are no exception. According to our data, 63 percent fear possible repression from the Russian government even when abroad (see Figure 2). Thus, the reliability of the research team is especially important for respondents fleeing repressive regimes. We collaborate with a number of nongovernmental organizations, migrant communities, and influencers. Not only does collaboration make it possible to reach out to broad audiences quickly, but it also shows the trustworthiness of the researchers by signaling independence from the Russian government.

Figure 2: Fear of Repression for Manifesting Political Views



Data: Outrush survey (https://outrush.io/), September 2022, N=1929.

Maintaining the Panel

Panel surveys are difficult to maintain. Any panel survey suffers from attrition bias—but particularly emigrant surveys, as their respondents move around a lot and may lose/change their status.

In panel surveys, it is useful to design a questionnaire carefully and neatly, to deploy non-mandatory questions, and to communicate the value of the study to respondents. It signals empathy and consideration to respondents and helps to sustain their engagement in the panel. It is also important to communicate the data protection procedures openly, in detail, and in simple language to soothe respondents' anxiety about possible data leaks and de-anonymization.[4]

Dissemination of the results beyond academia is a way to ensure respondents' commitment because it quickly provides results that are accessible and interesting to the respondents themselves. It takes a lot of work to analyze the data relatively rapidly and to put together non-academic materials. Distribution of the results among respondents requires effort and resources to set up an infrastructure and bypass spam filters but helps to sustain communication in the subsequent waves of the survey.[5]

By applying these strategies, we have managed to achieve relatively high levels of respondent satisfaction (4.2 out of 5—see Figure 3) as well as completion rates (80 percent).[6] Fifty-three percent of respondents said they would surely circulate the survey link among their networks. The initial retention rate for our panel survey is 60–70 percent,[7] which is comparable to, for instance,

3 The general chats are used to share information about legal issues and the integration process. In more specific local chats, emigrants discuss their daily life, share information about daycare and schools, look for jobs, offer their services, plan leisure activities, and make new connections. This is how a 25-year-old manager in Tbilisi explains his daily practices of Telegram usage: "I've been added to the chat room, and there are already 33 people there, and I'm at almost every new meeting that we have there… I meet new people every time. I've never had so many new acquaintances, because I'm quite a closed person."

4 In our research, safe and ethical data storage was ensured by following the recommendations of the Ethical Committee and the data protection officer of the European University Institute.

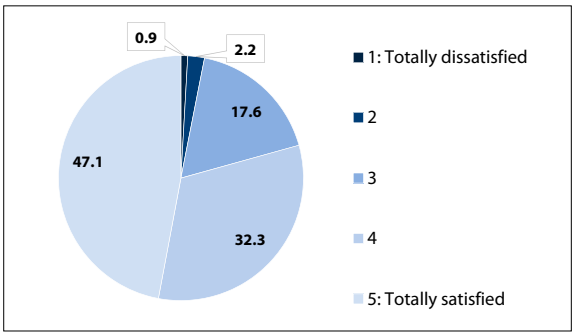
5 In the OutRush project, we distribute survey reports for each survey wave using a media platform of the respondents' choice (e-mail, Telegram or WhatsApp).

6 Some respondents shared in open feedback that they found the survey "therapeutic" or "helpful."

7 In the first wave of our survey, of the 1,680 new Russian emigrants who completed the survey, 1,032 left their contact information. Of these, 70 percent took the second wave of the survey and 60 percent fully completed it. We test our panel sample to ensure there is no sample bias. The sampling bias of regular respondents may arise because not all respondents who left contacts responded in the second wave. We make sure that the difference in important social characteristics between these two groups (those who have responded to the second wave and those who have not) is not statistically significant. The results of the sample bias test show that there is no statistically significant difference in such variables as gender, age, income, plans to return to Russia, and uncertainty about plans for the future. In other words, respondents and non-respondents in the panel survey do not differ from one another statistically on these variables.

the averages of the German Internet Panel, which is managed with significantly more resources.

Figure 3: Respondents' Satisfaction with the Survey



Data: Outrush survey (https://outrush.io/), September 2022, N=2008.

Conclusion

The current wave of Russian emigration is politicized, fast-paced; very educated people left their homes under circumstances of exceptional crisis. This creates both research difficulties, because the population is mobile and cautious, and opportunities, due to the group's homogeneity in Telegram usage and engagement. Compared to similar projects, the OutRush project stands out as the only panel survey of new Russian emigrants that traces the dynamic of their situation in more than a hundred countries. Ethical, respondent-friendly, and transparent research practices have proved their effectiveness at retaining panelists and recruiting new participants. The shortcomings of data originating from surveys of Russian migrants are not specific to the Russian context and are well-known to the students of emigration. Imperfect data are always better than ungrounded speculations, although it is of the utmost importance to be transparent about limitations and challenges.

About the Authors

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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