

How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants

Vorobeva, Ekaterina

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BRAIN DRAIN FROM RUSSIA AFTER FEBRUARY 24TH 2022

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How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants

By Ekaterina Vorobeva (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

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Abstract

The “partial mobilization” recently announced in Russia has triggered an unprecedented outmigration that may amount to 1 million people (Tofaniuk and Saprionova 2022). It has played different yet crucial roles in the lives of recent Russian migrants, forcing members of various social groups—from non-migrants to transmigrants—into emigration. It is important to acknowledge this diversity in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of ongoing migration processes and their possible outcomes.

Introduction

On September 21, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced partial mobilization of reservists, marking the first time the measure had been taken since World War II. According to the decree “On the Declaration of Partial Mobilization in the Russian Federation,” men in the armed forces reserve who are aged 25–35, who have previously served in the Russian army, and who have combat experience or military specialties were called up to join the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. The target number of mobilized reservists announced by the Ministry of Defense was set at 300,000 people. Although official sources have remained silent about the reasons for this mobilization, Russia's recent defeats in Eastern Ukraine, accompanied by significant losses of military personnel, could have compelled the Russian government to take such a firm action.

Despite clear directives as to who should be mobilized, military commissars committed numerous egregious violations across the country: students, the elderly, and even disabled people were called up. As a result of this inadequate implementation, the partial mobilization resulted in country-wide protests and outmigration of reservists to the neighboring states of Finland, Georgia, and Kazakhstan. Although official statistics are lacking, as many as one million Russians may have left the country since the announcement of partial mobilization (as of October 4—see Tofaniuk and Saprionova 2022).

However, was partial mobilization the main driver of—or just one of many reasons for—the mass outmigration? In other words, what role did the partial mobilization play in the decision-making processes of recent Russian immigrants? To answer this question, the article explores recent original qualitative data collected from Russian reservists. The dataset includes 15 in-depth phone interviews conducted between September 28 and October 8, 2022. The interviewees currently reside in Slovenia, Finland, Kazakhstan, and Georgia; some of them are still on the move to their final destinations,

which include Serbia and Israel. Prior to immigration, the majority lived in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Almost all interviewees hold higher education degrees; they work in the fields of the IT sector, engineering, marketing, and other industries. Around half of them are married with kids.

Mobilizing Potential Migrants

As the data demonstrate, recent Russian migrants appear to be a relatively heterogenous group with respect to their migration histories and aspirations. Four major groups emerge from the collected empirical data; for each group, the partial mobilization played a different role in their decision-making regarding emigration. These groups are:

1. sedentary males, for whom the partial mobilization was a primary reason for emigration;
2. trailing family members of reservists, for whom it was a secondary reason for emigration;
3. soon-to-be migrants, for whom it accelerated their migration process; and
4. transmigrants, for whom the partial mobilization halted their transnational lifestyles.

Each of these groups is discussed in more detail below.

The majority of interviewees decided to emigrate shortly after the partial mobilization was announced. Men usually took 1–3 days to decide how to react to the new measure. However, hearing in the news about and observing with their own eyes flagrant violations during the recruitment process made them realize the urgent necessity of emigration. They had to sort out related matters in the shortest possible time: resigning from jobs or arranging remote work, choosing an immigration destination, and moving out of and/or renting their apartments in Russia. Interviewees' choice of immigration destinations depended on the availability of affordable flights as well as on their support networks of friends, relatives, and acquaintances abroad. Sergei (names have been changed to maintain confidentiality) describes his quick decision-making process:

During the day I looked at destinations, got an idea. In a day, the next day I woke up and started looking at tickets for the next weekend. It was Wednesday or Thursday, I don't remember. I was already looking at weekend tickets to leave faster. Everywhere was overpriced, no matter whether it was Kazakhstan, Georgia, something else. I had guys in Georgia, my close acquaintances, friends. Therefore, without thinking twice, I bought tickets to Vladikavkaz—there were no direct ones—and I took a trip from Vladikavkaz there.

The second wave of migrants is now in the process of formation. Family members of reservists who initially stayed in Russia to deal with the sale of property and prepare the necessary documentation will likely soon join their partners abroad. For these so-called trailing wives and children, the partial mobilization was not their primary reason for emigration; it is a desire to keep the family together that pushes them to follow the male heads of their households. Alexei explains:

My family doesn't mind [joining me abroad]. The family is now deciding when to do so. But no one will answer this question except ourselves, because as time has shown, it should have been done yesterday, but psychologically it is not easy to decide on this, to change country and probably start everything over from scratch. Since I do everything remotely anyway, I don't care where I am [...] in principle the situation is getting to the point that it [them joining me] just needs to be accelerated already.

A third group of interviewees had had aspirations or plans to immigrate since long before the partial mobilization was announced. As economic conditions and the political situation in Russia deteriorated rapidly over the past few years, some interviewees began thinking about emigration—in some cases even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the case of Maxim, who started planning his emigration in 2018. Since then, he has been busy authenticating his degree, saving money, and looking for a good job offer in Canada, the immigration destination he and his wife chose due to the country's high standard of living. However, the pandemic interfered with their plans; the number of open vacancies decreased and physical mobility was restricted. Therefore, the family's immigration was postponed until after the pandemic. But when the partial mobilization threatened his freedom of movement, Maxim bought a plane ticket to Kazakhstan and left. His wife and three kids are expected to join him in a month after completing the necessary preparations for permanent emigration. For this group of soon-to-be migrants, the partial mobilization therefore provided a strong impulse to leave as

soon as possible; however, they would have emigrated sooner or later anyway. As Pavel, who has moved from St. Petersburg to Slovenia, explains:

In fact, I've been thinking about moving for a long time. Probably, mobilization was just a push. But in general, I've been thinking about moving for a long time, I don't know, maybe five years ago I started thinking about it.

Finally, the partial mobilization severely affected transmigrants, individuals whose lives took place across borders (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Fear for their own safety in Russia put to an end to the cross-border mobility of transmigrants; some interviewees felt as though they had been pushed to abandon their transnational lifestyles and turn into real emigrants. However, the partial mobilization has not stopped them from engaging in so-called digital transnationalism: transmigrants remain in touch with their families, friends, and business partners in Russia. For example, due to his business activities, Andrei was a transmigrant living across the borders of Russia and Finland. However, in the wake of recent events, he no longer felt safe in Russia and decided to move from Moscow to Helsinki for the time being. Andrei describes his displeasure at the necessity to abandon his transnational lifestyle and to cut off ties to Russia, at least temporarily:

I love the region where I was born, I love Karelia, I adore it. I'm not at all ready to break ties with it; rather, I never wanted to do it and I don't want to now. Of course, if I am forced to do this, I don't know, just by some very extreme steps that are already taken by the government, of course, I will be forced, but I am not ready for this break yet, I don't want to do it. So far, there are no conditions that would force me to give up my friends, my life there, everything that I have achieved there, that I have. I have real estate there, I have a family, I have a job. There are people I promised to help, there are non-profit organizations, social projects that are also important to me, I put my soul into it. [...] I wanted to be a man of the world, not an emigrant; [I wanted to be] a person without labels. I would like to live freely, move around the world.

As a Final Remark

While it has struggled to marshal troops, the partial mobilization has proved to be more successful at mobilizing reservists and others as migrants. It not only pushed the sedentary population to move abroad, but also turned the family members of reservists and transmigrants into emigrants. Finally, it served to accelerate the emigration of soon-to-be migrants. Thus, although active outmigration has been taking place for more than

six months now, the announcement of partial mobilization and its subsequent poor implementation significantly accelerated and intensified the process of emigration, creating an unprecedented situation in Russia and in neighboring states alike.

The data presented demonstrate the existence of at least four major groups within the recent flow of Russian migrants. These groups differ with regard to the role that the partial mobilization played in their migration histories and aspirations. Acknowledging this diversity is vital for several reasons. First of all, it allows for

a more nuanced and precise understanding of the ongoing migration processes. Second, the future trajectories of migrants—e.g., the length of their stays abroad and their integration efforts—may depend heavily on their aspirations for migration. Awareness of those differences therefore improves our ability to predict their behavior. Finally, when it comes to policymaking and humanitarian aid, exploring this diversity can help improve our understanding of which forms of assistance and support mechanisms members of each group might need.

About the Author

Ekaterina Vorobeva is a doctoral candidate at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. She is a migration scholar focusing on forced migration, migrant entrepreneurship, and transnationalism in Europe and post-Soviet states. This publication has been produced within the ITN “Markets,” which is funded by an EU-MSCA grant (Horizon 2020, grant agreement no. 861034).

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ANALYSIS

Russian State-Run Media Coverage of War-Related Brain Drain

By Daria Zakharova (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused an unprecedented outflow of Ukrainian refugees to Europe and other neighboring countries. Russia has also faced its own waves of emigration, which reached their climax after the announcement of “partial mobilization” in the country on September 21, 2022. This article analyzes how Russian state-run media have been treating emigrants and covering the process.

Beginning of War: IT Emigration

The beginning of the war caused the phenomenon of “IT emigration” from Russia. Western sanctions on the Russian financial sector that aggravated the outsourcing of IT services, coupled with the withdrawal of some companies essential for IT developers (AWS, Google Cloud, JetBrains and others) from the Russian market, negatively impacted the sector. Moreover, Russian developers are often pursued by foreign recruiters. These factors combined to result in more than 100,000 IT workers leaving Russia in the first two months following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian state-run media tend to hush up those topics that cast the Russian government in a negative light (for instance, the scale of Russian losses in the war in Ukraine). However, the problem of “IT emigration” at the beginning of the war was highlighted even by the most pro-governmental media. The state-run TV channel NTV aired a news segment titled “How to Accelerate Import-Substitution in the IT Industry and Motivate IT Specialists to Work in the Russian Federation.” In the video, Natalya Kasperky, the co-founder of Kaspersky Lab, indicated that there had been a significant outflow