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ANALYSIS

Migrants from Russia in Georgia during the War in Ukraine: Political Performance and the "Unpredictable Border"

Ekaterina Korableva (Center for Independent Social Research, Berlin)

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Abstract:
In this article, I explore Georgia as a destination for Russian political activists in exile and under prosecution. Since 2021, Tbilisi has become a sanctuary for an increasing number of people fleeing different forms of state violence in the Russian Federation. Among Russian citizens, the city has gained a reputation as a hub for those who oppose Putin's regime and the war in Ukraine. The everyday informal bordering produced by different actors in Tbilisi has also pushed migrants to engage in particular forms of political performance. However, as of 2023 the situation seems to be changing: some exiled activists are discovering that the visa-free regime that allowed them to come in the first place actually limits their freedom of movement and action.

Leaving Russia

The full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that the Russian government started in February 2022 was the final straw for many activists, journalists, and civic actors who had previously struggled to oppose Putin's authoritarianism from within the country. Along with many workers in the IT and creative sectors, as well as other more mobile or resourceful groups of people, activists from Russia chose the visa-free countries as their destinations for urgent evacuation. In spring 2022, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Serbia—among other countries—received the first influx of war-induced migration from Russia.

When making the decision to move, many of those interviewed had told themselves that they were leaving only for a few months to wait out and navigate the violent changes. By the summer of 2022—the time of the first interviews—they planned to stay for around 6 months. The unplanned and enforced nature of their departure, coupled with extreme uncertainty about the future and the increasingly stringent visa regulations for Russian citizens in Europe, motivated migrants to take up at least temporary residence in countries with lenient migration policies.

Migrating to Georgia

Migrants interviewed in Batumi and Tbilisi had primarily chosen between Armenia and Georgia as their destination. This established a new mobility pattern between the countries and sparked new narratives by migrants about these places. Often, when explaining why they had chosen Tbilisi, migrants would refer to their stay in Yerevan, and vice versa. Considerations that played a role in migrants' decisions to settle in Georgia were access, safety, viability, familiarity, comfort, and networking potential. Tbilisi was one of the few places migrants could physically reach—via a land border with Russia, as well as exorbitantly priced yet uninterrupted air connections to countries that neighbor Georgia. In addition, Georgia attracted migrants due to the persistence of a Russian-speaking environment and perceived affordability. Many had a positive image of the country from previous trips, as well as friends in the city who had already emigrated there. The liberal migration regime played a major role, as it allowed Russian citizens with an international passport a year-long visa-free stay that could be restarted by a "visa run,"[1] as well as the ability to work in the country legally.

In 2022, the Georgian officials reported that 112,000 Russian citizens had entered and were staying in the country. Surveys show that this migration consists largely of young, educated, and qualified people from large Russian cities, with incomes higher than the Russian average (Kuleshova et all, 2023; *Exodus 2022*, 2023). While IT workers constituted the most noticeable group, in spring 2022 Georgia seemed like a particularly desirable destination for those who were politically active. Compared to other accessible countries, Georgia was perceived as "free" and "more European," with a civil society that vocally condemned the war in Ukraine. Georgia already hosted a "zero wave"[2] of political migrants from Russia, who arrived after the annexation of Crimea and during the pre-war purges of the political opposition, as well as an influx of people from

1 A brief trip out of the country and back in order to restart the clock on the time an individual is allowed to stay in the country.

2 Those who arrived in Georgia immediately following the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine—in the spring of 2022—are frequently labeled as "the first wave." Those who came following the partial mobilization of military reservists—in the fall of 2022—are described as "the second wave."

Belarus fleeing the state aggression in their country. The new political migrants could therefore rely on the support of their precursors, network, and build infrastructure together. Many appreciated the absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia—those who had risked or experienced prosecution in Russia often repeated the phrase "Georgia won't extradite."

Infrastructure for Activism

The lack of migration regulation, combined with the ease of settling down and opening organizations in Georgia, initially created a favorable environment for migrants to establish new infrastructure and social networks that could respond rapidly to the unfolding crisis. Migrants who were already involved in translocal initiatives kept working remotely without losing much time in the "bureaucratic quest" to gain legal status in the new country. At the same time, a localized network of shelters, community centers, humanitarian organizations, support channels, and educational spaces sprang up. The activists pursued several main avenues of activities:

1) supporting the anti-war and anti-regime efforts in Russia—helping political prisoners, anti-war agitation, journalism, helping men evade the military draft, democratic education, solidarity campaigns, etc.
2) helping Ukrainian causes and Ukrainian refugees—fundraising, humanitarian aid, and evacuations (in contrast to other activities, the teams engaged in such initiatives proved to be very international).
3) assisting fellow migrants—generally speaking, neither the Georgian state nor the civil society recognized the new arrivals from Russia as a vulnerable group. Migrants themselves therefore made significant efforts to help and orient new migrants in distress, like the draft-evaders who arrived *en masse* through the land border at Verkhny Lars in the fall of 2022 (Lomsadze, 2022.)
4) learning about and solidarizing with Georgian causes—an endeavor apparently specific to the post-colonial context. In an effort to be respectful to their host society, which has severe historical grievances against Russia and, as recently as 2008, went through a war with Russia, migrants organized walks, rallies, eco-projects, study groups, and lectures related to Georgian history, culture, and perspective on conflicts. Topics related to imperialism and decolonization gained a lot of momentum. A rare (if not the only) free Georgian language and culture course, initiated by migrants and run by a Georgian NGO, had eight interested people per place available, reflecting a high demand among migrants from Russia to learn about Georgia.

The Issue of Visibility

Migrants with more entrepreneurial skills opened bars, cafes, studios, and bookstores. To show solidarity, they often decorated them with Ukrainian, Georgian, and white-blue-white flags, and placed donation boxes to raise money for Ukrainian refugees on the counter. Those who opened these businesses took pride in the opportunity to pay taxes in Georgia and not in Russia. However, they mostly hired fellow migrants and found few clients among the locals (Kuleshova et al., 2023). A large share of these businesses were centrally located and operated only in Russian and English, which soon began to cause tensions with some Georgian citizens and activists (Kucera, 2023).

Many Georgians started to associate the new migrants from Russia less with the anti-war and anti-Putin struggle, and more with wartime tourism and leisure (Lomsadze, 2023)—with expensive "Russian places" packed with middle-class digital workers and scandals involving people from Russia that went viral on media (e.g., Rizzo, 2023). Indeed, the active social life of the political migrant from Russia in Tbilisi involved little communication or collaboration with local civil society. This was due to the mass character of the migration, which made it easy for migrants to form a community with "their own," as well as the migrants' uncertain status and (often) feelings of guilt or shame about Russia's connection to imperial history, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the lingering legacy of conflict with Georgia. Navigating the uneasy moral landscape of the time, some activists from Russia chose to refrain from publicity and communication with their Georgian counterparts as an ethical strategy. Interactions between the two civil societies were further limited by distancing on part of the Georgians (Tsaava, 2023).

The question of denomination and self-designation of migrants from Russia is particularly relevant. Their mobility has occurred in parallel with the large-scale displacement of people from war-torn Ukraine, more than 8 million of whom are on the move (*United Nations*, 2023). In Georgia, however, newcomers from Russia outnumber those who arrive from Ukraine (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022.) Matters are further complicated by the ongoing struggle of the internally displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region (*United Nations*, 2023), as well as the history of Russian tourism in Georgia, xenophobia in Russia, and the issue of class.

While there is a relative consensus that the term "refugee" describes the situation of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, migrants from Russia seem to be rather fluid in their description of their condition. Some resort to the neologism "**relocant**" or try to blend in with Tbilisi's international crowd of "**expats**." That being said, one IT

worker shared that, since he had heard that "rich white people created the word 'expat' to separate themselves from labor migrants," he only called himself an "**emigrant**." Simultaneously, the most vulnerable migrants from Russia I interviewed—those who worked the hardest and most precarious jobs, took out loans, did not know English, and struggled with severe depression—called themselves "expats."

The phrase "**economic migrant**," when employed in relation to this migration in Georgia, takes on a new, often negative connotation. While it has expectedly developed in opposition to the terms "political migrant" and "refugee," in Georgia it has become associated with *economic privilege*—with middle-class cafes and fancy promotions on social media—and has been linked to the question of visibility and performance.

The Border within the City

The anxiety and traumas that the war has brought to the surface, along with skyrocketing prices, the polarization of domestic politics, and a lack of meaningful communication with incoming migrants, have created tangible tension in Georgia's largest cities. The deregulation of various sectors (migration, the rental market, tourism industry, small business registration) has made this encounter even more complicated. In the media, a lot of concern has therefore been expressed about the permeability of the Russian-Georgian border (*The Village*, 2022; *Civil.ge*, 2023; *Ekho Kavkaza*, 2023; Kirby, Paul, 2022.) Calls for introducing a visa regime with Russia have found significant support among Georgians (*Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 2022; *CRRC Georgia,* 2022.) The Russian authorities, on the other hand, have taken steps to facilitate mobility between the countries—introducing a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens and resuming the direct air routes that had been halted in 2019 (*The Associated Press*, 2023.)

In this climate, a dynamic, *insurgent border* has emerged, most prominently in Tbilisi—a decentralized border produced by civil, private, and individual actors. This everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019) has manifested itself in the war- and migration-related graffiti that has covered the city center (Kucera, 2023), in the politicization of the Russian language among Georgian youth, and in the impromptu "visas" and "sanctions" that private businesses—from banks and landlords to techno clubs—have created in order to filter out migrants with undesirable political stances. This border has emerged in small talk and exchanges between migrants and locals, as well as in ways migrants have marked themselves as being among the "respectful" or "desirable" ones (through language practices and visual markers).

An example of an "insurgent visa" for Russian citizens created by the team of Dedaena bar, Tbilisi. The full form, which Russian citizens need to fill out before visiting the bar, can be found on their website (https://dedaenabar.ge/for-russians, accessed September 8, 2023).

/ Visa For Citizens Of Russia

Registration Form

*Citizens Of Russia Need A VISA To Enter Dedaena Bar Because Not ALL Russians Are Welcome. We Stand For Equality And Unity, But We Need To Make Sure, That Brainwashed Russian Imperialists Do Not End Up In Our Bar. Please Support Us By Filling Up A VISA Application, So Nobody Has To Hang Out Alongside Ass*Oles. Thanks For Understanding.*

Name * Surname *

I Am A Citizen Of Russia Visiting Georgia. Having Respect For My Host Country And its People, I Agree To Following:

- [ ] I Didn't Vote For Putin, He Is A Dictator
- [ ] I Condemn Russian Aggression In Ukraine
- [ ] Crimea Is Ukraine, So Are Other Disputed Territories
- [ ] Abkhazia And Tskhinvali Regions Are Georgia
- [ ] 20% Of Georgia Are Occupied By Russia
- [ ] Every 12th Georgian Turned Into A Refugee Due To Russian Invasion
- [ ] I Like The Phrase "Russkii Voennii Karabl, Idi Na Xui"
- [ ] Slava Ukraini

I Understand That Dedaena Bar Is A Friendly And Tolerant Place And Visa Policy Had Been Implemented Due To A Delicate Political Situation And Some "Bad" Russians Who Misbehaved In Dedaena Bar.

I Have Read Through General Code Of Behavior:

- [ ] Please Understand, After Crossing Georgian Border, You Are In A Foreign Country, Act Accordingly

An example of one of many contested urban texts related to migration from Russia on the walls of central Tbilisi. This particular graffiti remained for at least several months, with additions and corrections by different authors. Photo taken by the author, 2023.

Despite these daily experiences, most of the interviewed migrants described their stay in Georgia as largely "safe and comfortable" and testified to encountering little to no aggression or discrimination. However, the visa-free regime that had initially allowed Russian citizens to enter Georgia *en masse* and remain in the country without assuming any formal status soon proved to be limiting their freedom of movement.

The "Unpredictable Border"

Since summer 2022, an increasing number of cases of migrants being turned away at the Georgian border gained media attention in migrant circles. People doing "visa runs" or traveling for leisure or professional purposes were being denied entry to Georgia with no explanation. The logic behind this profiling remained ambiguous: the border guards did not reveal the reasons for non-admission, and neither permanent residency, employment, property ownership, nor the presence of dependents in the country seemed to exempt migrants from these risks.

In March 2023, a local migrant media outlet published instructions for preparing to cross the Georgian border with the risk of not being re-admitted (*Paper Kartuli*, 2023):

- take all your documents
- pack your belongings so that they can be shipped
- give friends a copy of your key
- find a lawyer

This situation motivated some migrants to cancel their trips abroad and some considered taking the risk of overstaying the allowed visa-free period. Upon realizing that legalization[3] in the country was also complicated (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022), many decided to start looking for yet another home elsewhere. Those who had previously felt optimistic about settling in Georgia became less motivated to learn the language and make other attempts to integrate.

In Georgia, there is known to be systemic border violence against Russian citizens from the North Caucasus. Reports also reveal persistent discrimination against people from South Asian and African countries. In the case of Russian citizens from other regions, Belarusian, and even Ukrainian nationals, non-admission at the border seems to affect people with various backgrounds and connections to the country (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022). Some who were initially turned away have found ways to return with the help of human rights NGOs. One journalist testifies to having returned to Georgia simply by waiting and experimenting with different routes.

Yet among migrants from Russia, this deregulated border regime became firmly associated with media presence and opposition activities. As various journalists, human rights workers, and "foreign agents" were turned back when trying to enter the country (Bregvadze, 2023), rumors that the FSB had provided special lists to the Georgian border police spread among migrant communities. For some migrants, these rumors influenced not only their migration plans, but also their decisions regarding political activity. Increased publicity around activism or participation in street politics became associated with potential immobility or further displacement.

The non-transparent bordering with Russia, observed on different levels, affects Georgian society. "It is also unpredictable where [this border] is. Because we don't actually know," comments urban planner Elena Darjania, implicitly referring, among other things, to the issue of illegal borderization along the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region (Amnesty International, 2019.) Darjania adds: "We have upcoming elections and I see a lot of discussion that this election can also be perceived as a border." Georgia's parliamentary elections of 2024, among other things, may change the current party's course on maintaining the status quo in relation to the war-induced migration from Russia. The tangible anxiety and fear surrounding the migration process that is felt in parts of Georgian society may also be manipulated during the upcoming political campaigns.

Moving On

All the complexities described above invite us to look more closely at how the visa-free regime between Russia and Georgia actually operates and what social effects it breeds. What first appeared to some as an "open border" proved to be an unpredictable, deregulated border capable of limiting both migrants' mobility and their agency. At the same time, the border as a *process* and *experience* transcends state lines and permeates the capital city. With its insurgent nature—perpetuated in texts, speech acts and practices—it is invoked by various actors who are not part of the military or the state.

Tbilisi, as one of the centers of Russian political migration, is slowly losing its reputation as a safe destination for the most vocal opponents of the war and the political regime in Russia. For political activists, the most common avenue to further mobility is a humanitarian visa to Germany. In order to apply, one needs to be a member of a group at risk, prove discrimination or

3 It is not only those trying to obtain residence permits who struggle with the non-transparency of Georgian migration policy, but also those eligible and ready to apply for Georgian citizenship (Akhaltskha.net, 2023).

prosecution in Russia, and show ties to German organizations. This has inspired the curious practice among Russian citizens of gathering their "opposition portfolios," while those activists who are less institutionalized or lack qualifying experiences feel somewhat excluded.

To be *accepted* both in Georgia and in Germany, Russian citizens need to demonstrate both their political stance and that they have exercised agency in opposing the war in Ukraine and the Putin regime. However, what could be *performed* in Tbilisi requires documentary evidence at the more bureaucratized border with the European Union. One may perhaps hope that the EU border only needs crossing once, at least for a while. Life in Tbilisi, in its unique and specific forms, requires it daily.

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ANALYSIS

Buryatia and Buryats in Light of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstrac

This paper looks at how the Russo-Ukrainian war has affected Buryatia and Buryats, as well as what this might mean for the future of the region. Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group who have historically been split across three countries: Russia, Mongolia, and China. Based on the available data, it appears that Buryats and/or soldiers from Buryatia are overrepresented among casualties on the Russian side. The article explores this overrepresentation and local reactions thereto, placing these grievances in historical context.

The war in Ukraine has escalated discussions of ethnic identity and belonging among ethnic minority populations in the Russian Federation. Many are redefining what it means to be an ethnic minority in Russia and their place in the country's social and political fabric. Official Russian discourse emphasizes unity between the three Eastern Slavic peoples: Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. While the Russian state has waged a war to realize this vision, its non-Slavic minorities are debating their place in the Slavic-dominated nation. These debates are important and consequential for the present and the future of the Russian Federation. Ethnic minority citizens constitute around one-fifth of the population of Russia. In terms of territory, 26 of Russia's 83 internationally recognized federal subjects are political units that have historically been governed by indigenous and/or ethnic minority groups (of which 21 are republics, 1 is an autonomous oblast, and 4 are autonomous okrugs).

On the one hand, the Russo-Ukrainian war has facilitated deeper integration of minorities into Russia. Many have sacrificed their lives for the country or endured war- and sanctions-related effects such as restricted international mobility. A disproportionate share of Russia's casualties appear to come from minority regions; they also appear to be overrepresented in military drafting.[1] Some seek to justify these losses using the Russian state's official narratives, making a concerted effort to increase the connection of ethnic minorities to the state. To give just one striking example, in a speech in the early days of the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin commemorated a deceased Lak lieutenant, granting him the title of Hero of Russia: "When I see examples of such heroism, like the feat of the young man Nurmagomed

1 According to data from August 24, 2023, Buryatia has the fifth-highest official casualty rate in Russia (898). It is the second-highest casualty rate when accounting for the size of the region's population. Much more populous Moscow has 309 casualties, while St. Petersburg has 305. "Russian Casualties in Ukraine," *Mediazona*, accessed August 4, 2023, https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/20/casualties_eng.