Uncertain Horizons: Russians in Exile

Osh Kyrgyzstan, January 2023. Photo credit: Yan Matusevich.

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caused the displacement of millions of Ukrainians while also triggering mass emigration from Russia on a scale not seen arguably since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It is estimated that over 800,000 people have left Russia since the start of the war, relocating to diverse destinations including Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Turkey and Germany. The motivations for moving abroad are multiple and often overlapping, from fear of political repression and avoidance of military conscription to concerns over Russia's increasing isolation and poor economic prospects. Russian migrants find themselves dispersed as temporary residents in countries like Turkey, Serbia and several former Soviet republics, asylum seekers in the United States and the European Union, or perpetually on the move between several visa-free destinations around the world.

This article provides an overview of recent migration trends from Russia, looks at the profiles of Russian migrants abroad, their main destination countries, future prospects as well as the impact of this migration on transit and destination countries. It also briefly considers the likelihood of continued or onward migration by analyzing ongoing changes in the political and economic landscape, both in Russia and abroad.

Escaping Russia

Igor considers himself lucky.[1] One day in early October 2022 he got a phone call from his next-door neighbour telling him that the police had come looking for him with a draft notice. An engineer and videographer in his late 40s, Igor had just stepped out of the apartment to drop his son off at school.

> *"I knew they would come looking for me eventually, so I had a bag with my gear and a few belongings all packed and ready to go."*

The next day, he hopped on a train from his home city of Novosibirsk in Siberia heading to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, leaving behind his four children and a teaching position at the university. Despite his age and lack of combat experience, Igor believes the Russian army wanted to conscript him due to the military training he received in precision artillery while completing his degree in quantum optics as a student.

Igor is one of hundreds of thousands of Russians who have moved abroad since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Faced with the reality of a repressive regime and the prospect of military conscription at home, Russians have left in large numbers, relocating to more than a dozen different countries across the globe. While accurate numbers are difficult to come by, Russian migration experts estimate that approximately 800,000 Russian citizens relocated abroad in 2022 by compiling data on border crossings and the issuance of residence permits in the main countries of destination.

The first six months of the war were marked by the departure of Russians who openly expressed their opposition to the war: political activists, journalists and civil society organizers. Some of those privileged enough to have professional or family ties abroad managed to relocate to Europe and North America. The vast majority of Russians fleeing the country went to neighbouring post-Soviet republics (Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) or countries with visa-free regimes for Russian citizens (Turkey, Serbia, Montenegro, Thailand, Vietnam, Argentina). Since an estimated 70 percent of Russians are not in possession of a valid travel passport, many rushed to Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – the only countries that allow Russian citizens to enter on their domestic identity papers, referred to in Russia as an "internal passport".

Those who moved abroad prior to the announcement of mobilization have tended to identify themselves as being more ideologically and political opposed to the Putin regime than the overwhelmingly male contingent of draft-dodgers who fled out of fear of being sent to the war. Sociological research on Russians in exile shows, however, that in reality these two groups of migrants are "quite similar in their socio-demographic composition and levels of professional experience".

In the months following mobilization, the sudden influx of Russian migrants overwhelmed the housing markets of capital cities in Russia's proximity like Tbilisi, Yerevan, Bishkek and Almaty. Rents soared overnight causing hardship for local tenants who were often pushed out to make way for Russian renters desperate for temporary housing.

Upon arriving in Bishkek, Igor avoided the housing crunch thanks to Aygül – an old Kyrgyz boarding school classmate from the Soviet era who took him into her family home, a small wooden house on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. There, he spent his first year in Kyrgyzstan, helping to take care of Aygül's elderly parents and working on 3D modeling projects as a freelancer.

Finding employment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Georgia has been challenging for most new arrivals. With the exception of Kazakhstan, salaries in these post-Soviet countries are significantly lower than in Russia and unemployment rates are high. Remittances from labour migrants are the backbone of the Armenian and Kyrgyz economy with large portions of the population migrating to work abroad.

With limited job prospects, many Russian migrants continue to work remotely for Russian employers or try their hand at entrepreneurship. Others rely on financial support from family members and sometimes rental income from Russia. As the war has dragged on, some have decided to sell their assets back home – real estate, cars and businesses – in order to sustain themselves abroad or fund relocating to another destination in the future.

New Russian legislation, allowing the state to confiscate the property of Russian citizens who criticize the war in Ukraine, passed on 1 February 2024 will likely accelerate the offloading of assets by Russians currently abroad.

Repression at home and abroad

In the two years since the beginning of the war, the Russian authorities have made a succession of legislative changes to slow down the exodus of military-aged men and punish those Russians who are already abroad. Since the summer of 2023, Russia has switched to delivering conscription notices to draftees electronically instead of by mail. Failure to appear at the local conscription office is now punishable with a travel ban and freezing of any assets in Russia. A new decree that came into force in December 2023 gives Russian security services and foreign diplomatic missions the authority to confiscate the travel passports of those liable to military service. Whether the Russian Ministry of Interior will have the technical capacity to actually nullify the travel passports of Russians who are already abroad, remains to be seen.

Sitting in the kitchen of a house he shares with three other Russian migrants, Igor says he is staying put in Kyrgyzstan despite all the rumours circulating on social media of the Russian government going after Russians abroad.

> *"I can feel the noose tightening around us [Russian migrants]. The Russian authorities want to hunt us down, but there is nowhere for me to go. I came to Kyrgyzstan on my internal passport and there is no way I am setting foot in a Russian consulate to apply for a travel passport."*

For now, Igor plans to stay under the radar, hunkered down in a quiet and relatively remote part of Kyrgyzstan, hoping to avoid any contact with state authorities. Though he had travelled for work to Europe in the past, he would prefer to stay in Kyrgyzstan where Russian is one of the official languages and everything is familiar.

The threat of forced returns looms large for Russian migrants who are currently residing in countries with a history of security cooperation with Russian authorities. Over the course of 2023, three different political activists were detained in Kyrgyzstan and subsequently handed over to Russian security services without due process. Alikhat Ammosov, an anti-war activist from Yakutia, has been placed in detention in Kazakhstan and is currently awaiting extradition to Russia despite having applied for political asylum in the country. There have also been several cases of Russian citizens critical of the war in Ukraine being deported from Vietnam under pressure from the Kremlin.

New restrictions, fewer options

These forms of repression and intimidation come at a time when countries with liberal travel regimes for Russian citizens are gradually restricting their immigration regulations. In Turkey, where more than 150,000 Russian citizens applied for residence permits in 2022, over 1,000 municipalities across the country have stopped issuing and extending permits to Russians, even those who have bought real estate in the country. In neighboring Georgia, where Russians enjoy a one-year visa regime, there have been numerous cases of border guards denying Russians already residing in the country from re-entering Georgia.

Even Kazakhstan, which should guarantee freedom of movement to Russian citizens as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), changed its migration regulations to prevent Russians from staying in the country indefinitely without a visa. Currently, Russian citizens seeking to reside in Kazakhstan must apply for a residence permit on the basis of employment, study or marriage. At the moment, Kyrgyzstan remains the only country in Central Asia that allows Russians to stay in the country on condition that they renew their registration every six months. It is unclear how long Kyrgyzstan will maintain its current open-door policy towards Russian citizens.

Evgeniy, a programmer from Moscow in his early 30s who arrived in Bishkek in October 2022, is happy with his life in Kyrgyzstan, but remains skeptical of his future in the country.

> *"While I don't feel any direct threat here in [Kyrgyzstan], I know that there is no safety for us [Russian migrants] anywhere within the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia is exporting its "digital gestapo" surveillance practices to Central Asia and things are only going to get worse in the long term."*

Despite his apprehensions of Russia's influence in Kyrgyzstan, Evgeniy has no immediate plans for relocating somewhere else.

> *"I'm lucky to have a chill job in Russia that pays me enough to live comfortably here in Kyrgyzstan. In Europe, I could maybe earn marginally more money, but my expenses would be exponentially higher. Given the current situation, it's senseless to strategize about the future. I'd rather live in the moment."*

Stuck in a vicious circle of temporary migration

Russian migrants currently residing in the Caucasus, Turkey and Central Asia are squeezed between new residency restrictions and increasing repression against them by the Russian state. Though no accurate numbers on return migration are available, researchers estimate that around 15 percent of Russians who fled abroad in 2022 have since returned home. Those without remote jobs and savings have been forced to return to Russia with the hope that mobilization efforts will eventually subside.

As a rule, however, the longer Russian migrants have remained abroad, the less likely they are to return to Russia. While many initially thought the war in Ukraine would soon end, there is a growing realization among Russians currently abroad that the war may drag on for many years in an environment of growing political repression. Unable to secure residency in any one country, many Russian migrants choose to circulate between countries with visa-free regimes, shuttling between Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam), the Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia), South Asia (India and Sri Lanka), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan). Online support groups on popular messaging apps such as Telegram help Russians on the move find temporary accommodation, often in shared housing with fellow countrymen in exile.

In search of a more permanent destination

Living such a transient lifestyle has taken a mental, physical and financial toll on many Russian migrants. In the face of uncertainty, restrictive migration policies and security threats, some Russian migrants are looking farther afield for more durable solutions for permanent residency.

Andrei and Yekaterina, a married couple from Saint-Petersburg, who had relocated to Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2022, decided to look for safer and more permanent solution for resettlement.

> *"When we moved to Central Asia, we had picked Kyrgyzstan because we thought it was a relatively open, liberal and democratic country in the region. Upon arrival, we realized that this wasn't exactly the case – and we decided to change our plans."*

After spending several weeks brainstorming other destinations, Andrei and Yekaterina decided Argentina was the best option.

> *"My wife had been denied EU visas on multiple occasions in the past, so we realized Argentina was one of the few countries that offered residency permits for people with passive rental income. We sold our apartment in St.Petersburg, purchased several rental properties in Georgia and then applied for residence permits in Argentina in late 2022. Our papers are still being processed, but we like living here and can see ourselves staying here long-term. The prospect of getting permanent residency here is a big part of the appeal."*

With its two-year residency requirement for citizenship, Argentina has become a popular destination in 2022 for Russian migrants looking for an affordable destination with an easy path to naturalization. Like several thousand other Russian migrants, Andrei and Yekaterina are currently residing in Buenos Aires, learning Spanish, working remotely and hoping to become Argentinian citizens in the near future.

In Mongolia, a small but important destination for Russian draft-dodgers from Siberia, Russian migrants of Kalmyk, Buryat and Tuvan ethnic background are currently petitioning the Mongolian government to create a special permanent residence card for Mongolic peoples of Russia, who have been disproportionately targeted by the Russian military mobilization drive. Their hope is that such a card would provide a clear path to Mongolian citizenship.

Since the start of the war, there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of Russians crossing into the United States from Mexico in order to apply for asylum. According to US Border Patrol data, there were more than ten times as many encounters with Russians at the US-Mexico border in 2023 as there were in 2021 before the war. Despite the risk of detention and deportation, many Russians believe their chances of obtaining asylum – or at the very least accessing the labour market as undocumented migrants – are much higher in the United States than in Europe.

Movements toward the EU

There has been a gradual increase in the number of asylum applications by Russian citizens in the EU since the start of the war – 49% more in 2023 than in 2019 prior to the pandemic (asylum data for 2023 is still outstanding for some EU countries, so the final number may be higher). Requests for asylum have not, however, surpassed the record levels of 2013 and 2016 when a far greater number of Russian citizens sought international protection in the EU, primarily ethnic Chechens fleeing repression and violence at home.

Pushbacks at the Poland-Belarus border, Finland's recent decision to seal its border with Russia, the lack of transportation links between Russia and the EU, and difficulty in obtaining short-term Schengen visas means that very few Russians have attempted to overstay their visas or cross into the EU irregularly. Many Russians thinking of moving to Europe are afraid of how they will be treated and perceived in EU countries as citizens of an aggressor state. Igor, who feels deeply ashamed for the actions of the Russian government, feels like Russian migrants are being stigmatized:

> *"I'm worried that all Russians are now perceived as bad people in Europe like the Germans were during WWII."*

Despite promises by German authorities of extending asylum to political opponents and conscientious objectors, in 2022 the recognition rate for Russian asylum applicants was at 33%, close to the EU average of 39% the same year. Russian recognition rates remain well below those of Belarusians (85%), Eritreans (84%) and Afghans (51%). Individual EU member states, such as Germany, France and Belgium are, issuing visas on humanitarian grounds to Russian journalists, political activists and members of the LGBTQ+ community currently residing in third countries. These humanitarian visa applications are considered on a case-by-case basis – a time-consuming and bureaucratic process that can drag on for over a year. Since the beginning of the war, Germany has granted the right of entry to 1,149 Russian citizens on humanitarian grounds. Statistics for other EU states have not been made publicly available.

Facing uncertainty

All signs seem to point to the Russian authorities continuing their course of repression against dissent, both at home and abroad. The Russian government recently announced that it is planning to make consular registration mandatory for all Russian citizens abroad, a move seen by many Russian migrants as an attempt to surveil those in exile. One of the key questions is the extent to which Russia will be able to pressure neighbouring states to crack down on Russian migrants. The arrival of Russian migrants, while putting a strain on the housing market and social cohesion, has also been economically profitable for poorer countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While the exodus from Russia peaked in 2022, new repressive laws, including the criminalization of the "LGBT movement" in Russia in late 2023, will continue to push victims of repression to seek safety abroad. Should President Putin announce a second round of mobilization, Russians will likely have fewer legal avenues for leaving the country at their disposal.

According to OutRush, a research project that monitors the integration of Russian migrants abroad, an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they feared repression from the Russian government regardless of their country of residence. The status of Russian migrants abroad remains precarious as evidenced by survey data showing that only 41 percent of Russian migrants described their situation as "relatively stable".

Russian employers are coming under increasing pressure from the government to prevent staff from working remotely, pushing Russian migrants to switch to freelance employment and undermining their financial stability.

Those with foreign language skills and professions in high demand are therefore actively searching for employment opportunities in Western countries, but for the vast majority of Russian migrants finding a more permanent safe abode remains an elusive dream.

Complex future scenario

The future for Russian migrants currently abroad remains uncertain. Many are residing in countries with strong political and security ties to Russia where their long-term safety cannot be guaranteed. While not all Russian migrants are looking to relocate to Europe and North America, many are increasingly worried about being within reach of Russian security services.

Igor, for example, is worried that Russia will use all the means at its disposal to retaliate against Russian migrants

> *"Western countries – the EU, Canada and the US – should launch a special program designed to accommodate Russians who are stuck abroad. For the most part, these are highly educated people with relevant work experience, who are against the current regime in Russia. Many of them left without foreign passports and are afraid they'll be extradited to Russia if they apply for travel documents. There needs to be a solution for them."*

At the moment, there seems to be little appetite within European policy circles for creating new legal avenues to protect and resettle Russian migrants. It is likely that the number of Russian asylum seekers will continue to grow, although exponential increase is unlikely given the difficulty in obtaining Schengen visas and expanding border closures with Russia. Irregular migration of Russian citizens to the EU remains low since at the moment the risks associated with clandestine crossings outweigh the potential benefits of finding safety in the EU.

At the same time, a major disruptor such as another round of mobilization, the collapse of the Russian currency or an uptick in violent political repression could provoke more – and potentially more desperate – departures. Any new mass movement from Russia will most likely cause additional strain on countries such as Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan that lack the infrastructure and capacity to process and integrate more new arrivals. The international community should be actively preparing for these types of scenarios in terms of their economic, political and humanitarian impact, both globally and in Russia's immediate proximity.

[1] Responses from semi-structured interviews conducted with Russian migrants in January 2024. Two interviews were conducted in-person in Kyrgyzstan, one interview was conducted over the phone with a Russian migrant currently residing in Argentina. These key informants requested their real names not to be used to protect them from reprisal. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

TOPICS: ECONOMY POLICY SCENARIOS TRENDS IN MIGRATION

REGION: EUROPE COUNTRIES: ARMENIA GEORGIA GERMANY KAZAKHSTAN KYRGYZSTAN RUSSIA SERBIA TURKEY UKRAINE UZBEKISTAN