

Russia's 2022 Anti-War Exodus

THE ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS OF RUSSIAN MIGRANTS

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Hundreds of thousands of Russians fled their homeland after their government launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24. It has been the largest brain drain from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The outflow of qualified labor and educated people will lead to the loss of human capital and knowledge, affect the states and societies to which they go, and influence the Russian political landscape at home. This memo analyzes the potential long-term effects of the anti-war migration wave in the post-Soviet space and Europe, which has accepted the lion's share of Russian migrants. Our review relies on a variety of data that allows for a systematic comparison of migrants' trajectories, their impact on the host state's domestic political landscape, and their ties with Russia. Russian migrants tend to be young, competent professionals but deal with isolation, lack of resources and prospects, enduring coronavirus restrictions, and the Kremlin's stigmatization of "bad vs. good Russians." However, whereas Russian communities abroad were once fertile ground for instrumentalization as pro-Kremlin soft power tools, the current wave has fragmented alignments with those communities, allowing for, conversely, alternate images of Russia to expand from the diaspora.

Background Waves

Approximately 200,000 Russians have [left](#) the country since February 24. As in previous migration waves, these are not purely economic migrants searching for a better life but primarily representatives of the political opposition. Their push factors blanket the lack

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of freedoms (especially freedom of speech and gathering), employment and professions (especially journalism and activism), and risks of arrest or other forms of political repression for their anti-war stance. Others, especially young men and their families, are scared by the potential for a military draft and rumors about border closures. For many families, the proliferation of pro-war propaganda in schools in kindergartens became the last straw. Economic reasons also matter as many foreign companies left Russia immediately after the war started, and their employees had to decide whether to stay or move. Paired with the escalating economic crisis in Russia, such fears generated a strong push factor for thousands, especially those employed in the information-technology (IT) sector.

This analysis draws on an original survey conducted from March 28 to April 4, 2022. The core data come from an online panel survey of a convenience sample of 2,000 migrants from Russia, followed up with semi-structured in-depth interviews and expert interviews.⁵

The Young, Educated, and Wealthy Are Leaving Russia

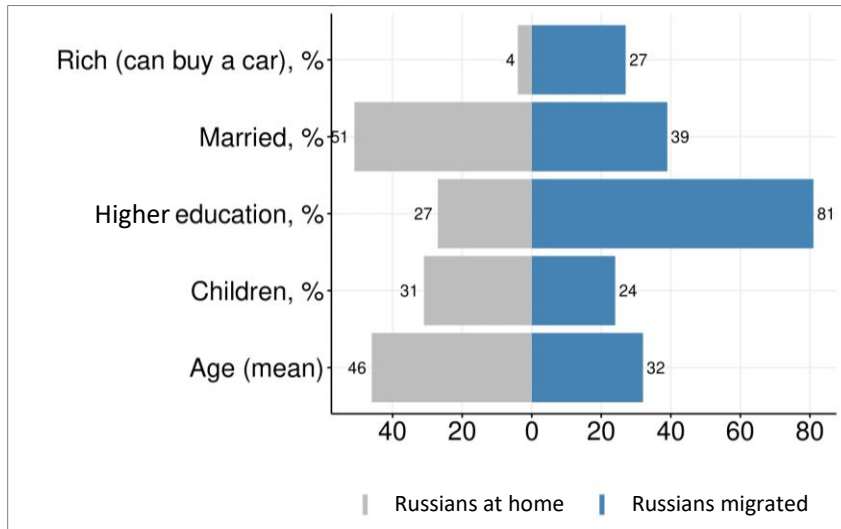
The impact of migration flows is usually mediated by individuals' socio-economic characteristics, skills, and employment prospects (see **Figure 1**). According to several accounts, the current migration wave mostly consists of middle-class representatives, highly educated people with large networks, and more liberal political [views](#). In other words, they are not representative of the Russian population and reflect the worldview of particular groups of highly educated, urbanized, and politicized citizens.

Our average respondent is 32 years old, while the mean age within the Russian population is 46 years. Most migrants come from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other big cities with more than one million inhabitants. Most respondents have higher education or a postgraduate degree (81 percent), traits claimed by only 27 percent of the general population.⁶ A noticeably higher level of pre-war economic well-being also distinguishes the migrants from the rest of the country. Prior to the war, when asked about their standard of living, 15 percent said they could indulge in every pleasure (against 1 percent in Russia), 27 percent could purchase a car (against 4.4 percent in Russia), and 46 percent could purchase expensive home appliances (against 26 percent in Russia).

⁵ Since there is no authoritative source of information on the demographic characteristics of the migrants, we rely on a convenience sample of 1,700 respondents recruited via online relocation groups and Telegram channels as well as networks close to the "OK Russians" project. The latter brings about strong self-selection, skewing the sample towards younger and more politically active respondents.

⁶ Hereafter we rely on socio-demographic data provided by the Levada Center in December 2021.

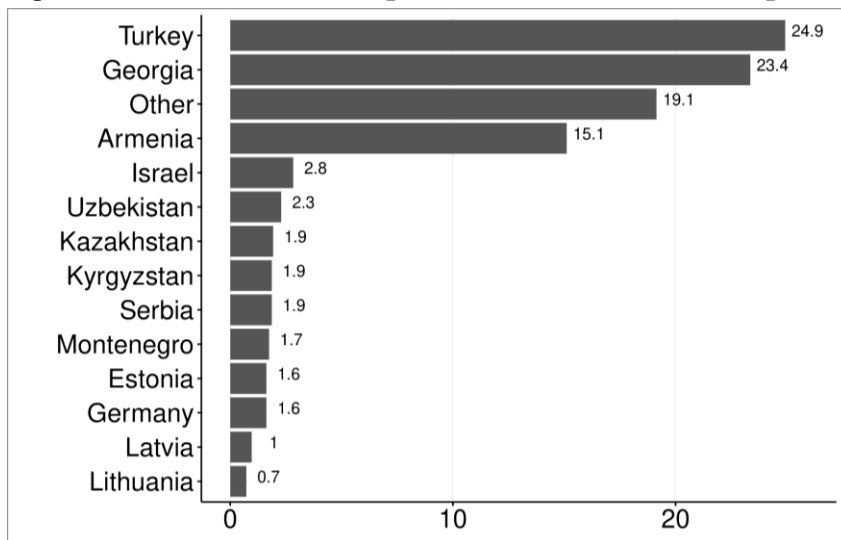
Figure 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics: Migrants vs. Russian Population



Regarding the pull factors for this wave of Russian migration, one should note the emergency aspect. Though migration flow from Russia has been stable and relatively high in recent years, most people who have left Russia in the last three months either did not plan it beforehand or thought of it from a more distant perspective.

The choice of countries (see **Figure 2**) was severely limited by COVID-19 quarantine measures and vaccination requirements, which include having updated COVID vaccination papers/cards. One challenge is that Russia’s Sputnik-V vaccine is not accepted by the WHO and most countries. Russian land and maritime borders have been restricted since March 2020 due to anti-coronavirus measures. Thus, trains, cars, and buses could not have been used easily for departing—except for special documented reasons (medical, scientific, residence/relatives abroad).

Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents Across Countries (percent)

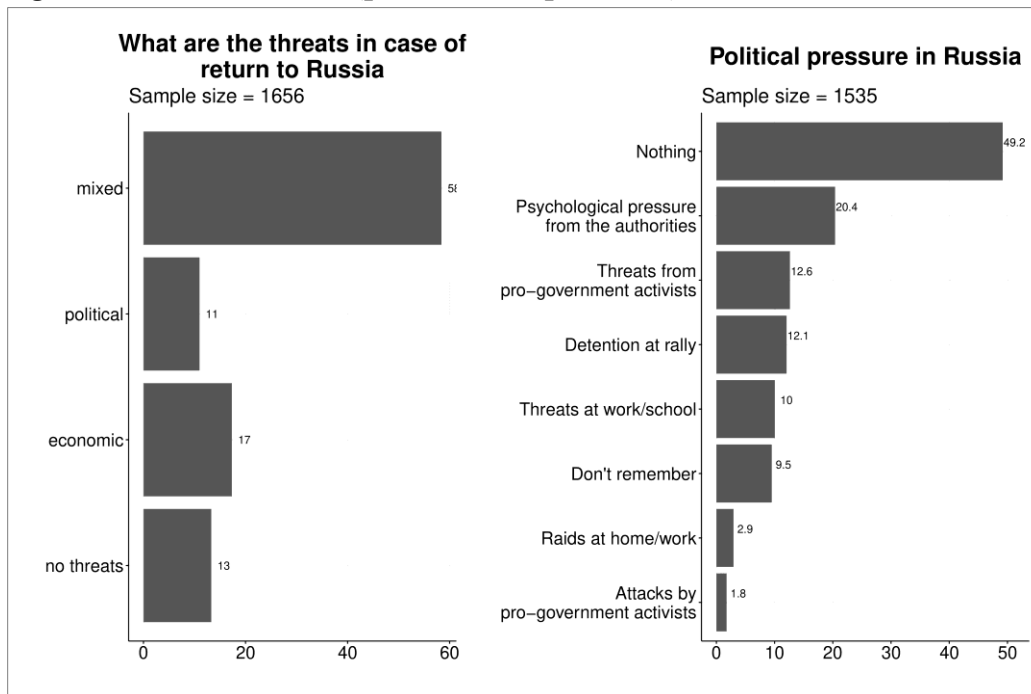


In the first days of the war, airplane flights with most European countries were disrupted. The majority of respondents settled down in Turkey (24.9 percent), Georgia (23.4 percent), and Armenia (15.1 percent), with the rest spread from Israel to Lithuania. However, less than half of the group plan to stay in these countries (43 percent), 18 percent intend to move further, 35 percent remain undecided, and only 3 percent plan to return. At first glance, it seems that the new migrants constitute merely a part of the anti-war citizenry as they had the means to leave the country. This suggests that many remain in Russia, with their numbers being unknown. In addition, activists from non-commercial sectors and journalists do not make up most of the migration wave, suggesting that civil activists and educators have been likely to stay in the country.

Escaping Repression and Economic Collapse

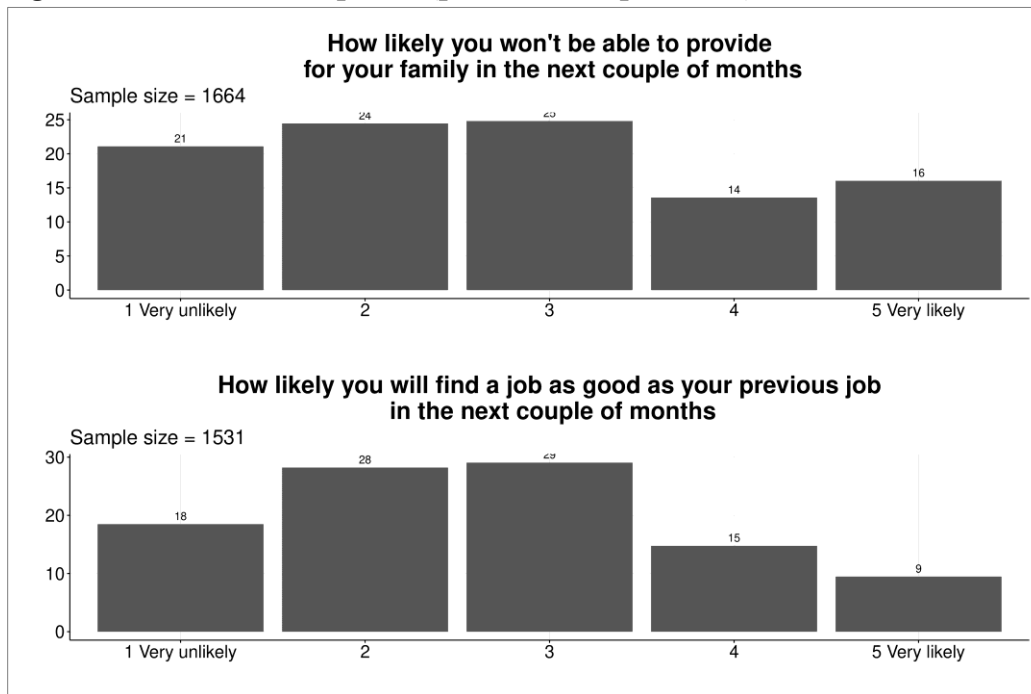
Many respondents experienced political and psychological pressure before their departure. Some received warnings from the authorities, others threats from pro-government activists, and a few were detained by the police (see **Figure 3**). Seventy percent of respondents believe that upon their return to Russia, they would suffer a drastic decline in quality of life, and 30 percent risk losing their work or right to study. In addition, half of the respondents expect prosecutions for posting and sharing information about the war in Ukraine on social networks, 20 percent fear conscription, 19 percent think they would lose access to necessary medication, and 9 percent anticipate criminal charges. Finally, 20 percent do not know what could happen if they return.

Figure 3. Political Threats (percent of respondents)



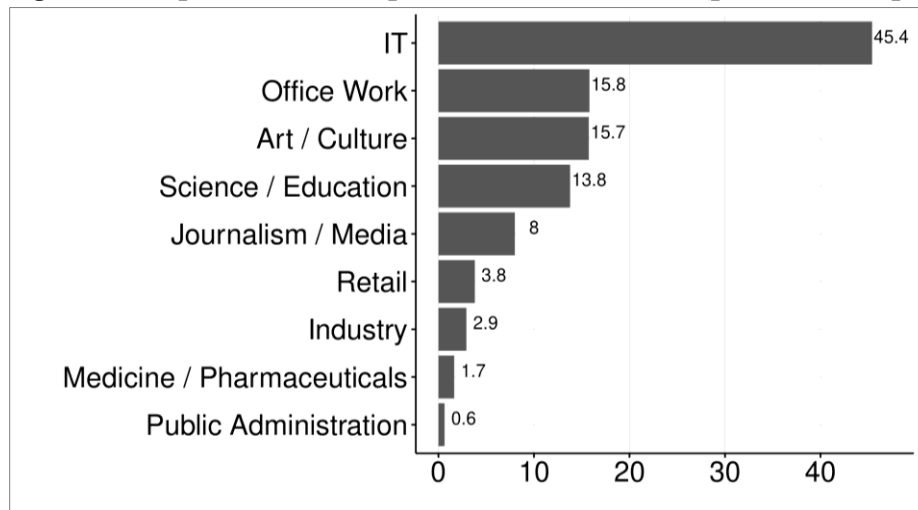
The war forced some Russians to reconsider their life trajectories due to the political pressure as well as grim economic prospects. Almost 1,000 companies curtailed operations in Russia; some offered relocation opportunities to their Russia-based personnel.³ Political and economic grounds may be closely entangled (see **Figure 4**). Most migrants were employed in the private sector; 37 percent worked in commercial enterprises, 30 percent were self-employed, 24 percent worked in international businesses, 13 percent were business owners, 7 percent were students, and only 5 percent worked in NGOs.

Figure 4. Economic Perceptions (percent of respondents)



Among those who had been employed, 45 percent were from the IT industry, 16 percent were from art and culture, 16 percent were managers, 14 percent worked in science and education, and 8 percent were journalists (see **Figure 5**). Half of the respondents wanted to continue their work with their current organizations, while the other half did not have such an opportunity or did not wish to use it. The main reasons why respondents left their current workplace were: 1) economic inefficiency and ruble devaluation, 2) unwillingness to pay taxes in Russia and to sponsor the war, and 3) expected layoff or planned change of workplace.

Figure 5. Respondents' Occupations before the War (percent of respondents)



Expectations and Fears

A significant fear is the military draft, especially among young men. Rumors about it developed in early March 2022 and became the main reason for many to leave and for some companies to relocate their employees. Other contributing rumors were about possible full Russian border closures and a rapid reduction of outbound airline flights. Though many people felt lost and depressed due to uncertainty, they acknowledge that the Ukrainians are suffering incomparably more. For this reason, they mostly rely on their own resources and networks as they go to new destinations.

Most migrants share a grim vision of the nearest future: 72 percent believe their life will worsen in the coming year, and 70 percent do not believe the political situation will improve. At the same time, 72 percent expressed concerns regarding possible discrimination against Russian nationals in the host country, while the same number never encountered actual discrimination.

Furthermore, because of sanctions, Western anti-war measures, and domestic economic problems, people have not been able to access their bank accounts or transfer money. Looking ahead, future economic expectations are also pessimistic: 30 percent do not think that they can support their families in the coming months. Among those who were employed at the time of the survey, 17 percent expected to lose their job. About half of the respondents believe their new job will be worse than their previous one. Predictably, IT specialists feel most confident about their employment perspectives, while healthcare workers feel most vulnerable.

Conclusion

The last wave of Russian emigration involves young, educated, politicized professionals who tend to envision a different Russia. Their integration into Russian migrant communities that arrived earlier is highly dubious as they differ in their political orientation, seek new leaders, and are much younger (generational clash in attitudes towards the war is most visible in Russia nowadays). Some of their destinations have established Russian communities, such as in Central Asia, but elsewhere, no strong old communities exist. Some have taken a post-colonial stance, interacting with locals in local languages, even complicated ones like Armenian or Georgian. The problem for them now is that they feel lost and disoriented, often having no support in their sending communities, almost none of it among their elders, and fear discrimination and lack of opportunities in the receiving societies. Self-organization and the help of various entrepreneurs is the main source of encouragement that keeps them afloat.

Taken together, four main conclusions can be drawn. First, new migrants differ drastically from the Russian population norm in terms of political attitudes, skills, trust, and economic well-being. Second, a degree of politicization and engagement is dramatically higher vis-a-vis the rest of the population as well as earlier migration waves; it is unlikely that they will integrate easily into existing Russian communities abroad due to their political stances. Third, new migrants are lost and disoriented, expect discrimination on the basis of citizenship, and share a grim vision of the future, having most of their plans destroyed, positions lost and experiencing depression, instability, and lack of hope. Fourth, new migrants have already demonstrated their capacity for self-organization; perhaps, they might be the source of alternative imaginations of Russia. This is where contested visions meet, as some members of the opposition proclaim agendas that exclude the majority of “bad Russians,” and others, like Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the most visible anti-war network grassroots movement in Russia, insist on an inclusive vision.