

LEAVE NOT STAY

Introduction to the Thematic Block

Vlada Baranova

*Vlada Baranova, Northeast Institute at the University of Hamburg, Germany.
vladakarada@gmail.com.*

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had an enormous impact on various areas of life in Russia itself; yet, one of its consequences most widely covered by the media was the mass emigration of Russian citizens. Why has it attracted so much attention from the media and researchers—several research groups are now examining various aspects of this new wave—and why is it of interest to the authors of this thematic block and editors of the journal where it is appearing?

First of all, the massive scale and simultaneity of the migration have led to discrepancies in its estimates. One of the most complete estimates is the combined data from the host countries presented by the *Esli byt' tochnym* (To be precise) platform that shows that approximately 800,000 Russian citizens left the country in 2022 (Shirmanova 2023). In any case, this is the most significant migration outflow from Russia over the past 20 years (Tinchurin et al. 2021), even if we assume that some of these people will return to the country in the foreseeable future or are already returning.

Moreover, the emigration goes on. The spikes of departures, noticeable by the increase in ticket prices and lines at the borders, occurred in the spring and then fall of 2022 (after the announcement of the “partial mobilization”), although emigration from the country continued in 2023, and, supposedly, will continue. Thus, according to the data of the Levada Center (2023), at the beginning of 2023, 11 percent of Russian citizens said they would like to move abroad. Although intentions to migrate are not necessarily followed by actual emigration, and after the mobilization was announced, among those who left the country were people who had never planned to do so, there are several points that can be noted. First of all, 11 percent of the Russian population is a considerable share, and it should be taken into account that emigration intentions are more often observed among young and educated Russian citizens. Secondly, the figures for 2023 are two times lower than what they were in 2021 (22 percent), that is, some people who considered emigration in general have moved during these two years or changed their mind.

Moreover, Russian citizens who emigrated in 2022–2023, alongside the more “developed” countries (Turkey, Israel, Serbia, the United States, countries of the European Union), chose destinations not quite familiar to them, primarily post-Soviet countries: Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Even after emigration, Russian migrants, on average, have a higher income and standard of living than citizens of host countries. For many years after the collapse of the USSR, the states that are now centers of gravity for new migrants were donors of labor force for

Russia. Russian citizens themselves had not moved to these countries, and many had never even been there. Thereby they have little idea of the standard of living, local culture, and significant events, including dramatic ones associated with armed conflicts. And, conversely, representatives of the current host communities have been following the events in Russia, often visited or worked in Russia, and, among other things, have experienced xenophobia and ethnic discrimination, for instance in the labor market (Bessudnov and Shcherbak 2020). The experience associated with the postcolonial status of the countries to which Russian citizens migrated en masse in 2022 affects the situation of the migrants, regardless of the extent of their own reflection: some prefer to distance themselves from local citizens and disregard the history of the relations between the countries, while for others such contacts become a valuable experience, prompting them to search for a new decolonial lens.

Another reason emigration is in the focus of public attention is the composition of the migrants. Per surveys, among the emigrants there is a large number of highly educated people, including journalists, teachers and scientists, IT specialists, people of creative occupations, and personnel of nonprofit organizations (Exodus-22 2023), that is, people who are prone to reflect on their experience through the production of texts, from articles to blogs. Moreover, a considerable number of these people have engaged in civic or political activism (Kamalov et al. 2023) and are accustomed to participation in public life in Russia. Finally, among the migrants there are many famous people, whose lives attract attention of both the media and researchers. It is not a coincidence that among the researchers of the new emigration wave the majority are the new emigrants themselves or Russian-speaking representatives of the academia of the previous waves, and only a few are Slavists from Western academia or researchers working in Russia.

All of the above leads to the fact that the understanding of the new emigration now largely occurs within the framework of native anthropology, with all the limitations and advantages known from other contexts, including the principle “nothing about us without us.” For many colleagues, including our research group Exodus-22 (previously After24), these projects began not as a regular academic work, but rather as volunteer initiatives of “independent researchers,” which allows using research lens to process new experiences: personal emigration or helping Ukrainian refugees and migrants from Russia (essay by Eva Rapoport presented in this issue is largely based on her experience working with the NGO Ark [Kovcheg]). The position of researchers within the community under study partly determines the lens that is used, including in this issue. It is very important that in the future it is supplemented by reflections from representatives of the host society (Mariam Darchiashvili started to develop such work within the project “Crossing Borders, Building Walls: Towards Ethnography of Russian War Mobilisation,” conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences¹), as well as by comparative analysis, providing insights into similarities with other urgent depar-

¹ <http://iaeapan.edu.pl/crossing-borders-building-walls-towards-ethnography-of-russian-war-mobilisation-2/>.

tures associated with changes in the domestic political situation, thereby avoiding the perception of the current Russian emigration as unique.

It is important to note that the emigration that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not a new phenomenon and resembles previous waves of Russian emigration. First of all, it continues the political emigration after 2012. As Joanna Fomina notes, this "political exodus" included students, civic activists, and middle-class professionals (2021:64). At the same time, the 2022–2023 emigration also continues the spread of Russian IT specialists, which reached noticeable proportions several decades ago (Biagioli and Lépinay 2019). This professional group is overall the most mobile, as they have opportunities to easily move from one country to another and join international teams and companies. IT specialists also form a social group of digital nomads—remote workers who choose as places of long-term residence cheap and picturesque locations, usually considered to be destinations for tourism rather than migration. Other migration decisions of Russian citizens in 2022–2023 fit within the framework of ethnic repatriations. Here, first of all we note the repatriation to Israel, although there is also a noteworthy trend of return migration to Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan among those who have dual citizenship or right to citizenship (e.g., second-generation migrants to Russia). Although migration decisions were closely connected with domestic and foreign political contexts, different people have integrated themselves into the forms of emigration and gaining legal status that were available to them, for instance, moving with their company or finding a new job, business relocation, educational migration, digital nomad visas, or searching for ethnic roots. These forms stipulate different strategies of emigrants' behavior and their opportunities in the host community. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons for the heterogeneity of the Russian migration, which is noted, in particular, in the essays presented here.

The situation of migrants is influenced by their role (their status in the host country) and the context of the host country, but also by the politics of the source country. Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004) distinguish three types of states depending on their attitude toward emigrants, and the Russian context is closest to the countries that revoke citizenship of those who leave or that are otherwise disinterested in emigration. Here, it is appropriate to recall statements of Russian officials about possible sanctions targeting those who left, as well as the policies of state companies regarding remote work.

What theoretical approaches help to understand the current emigration wave, considering its heterogeneity? The research lens of transnationalism entails abandoning the understanding of migration as a one-way process and shifting focus to transborder processes. An umbrella approach, rather than a theory in the strict sense, transnationalism includes various aspects of life in source and host communities, from legal provisions to accepted gender and family norms. The approach allows us not to look at transmigrants as successful or unsuccessful members of a new community (as is customary in integration approaches) or as representatives of ethnic groups or a country, but rather to describe their experience of "being migrants," living in several worlds or between them.

This approach is beneficial for understanding current processes, although it seems to have certain limitations for describing them. To understand migration in the framework of transnationalism, it is important that actors interact with two reference systems, namely the source and host societies (Abashin 2012; Brednikova 2021). Olga Brednikova elaborates on this idea: “there are several such reference systems, and migrants have to constantly read the surrounding contexts and situations in order to respond to challenges and behave in accordance with their requirements” (2021:76). However, the current migration wave, for instance in the South Caucasus, practically omits the referential framework of “here.” We can explain this phenomenon by the fact that this migration is partially forced and those who left do not want to see the new place, since they have not chosen it or have not decided whether they had left Russia for good or not.

Another explanation can be attributed to the place of migration itself. Migration from the former center to the former colonies and transient state of the migrants, majority of whom do not plan to stay in the country they migrated to and make plans for further moves (see the essay by Vlada Baranova and Verena Podolsky), or have moved already, as have the respondents in Rapoport’s essay, where each interview quote is followed with the points on the interviewee’s migration route. An interesting line of future research would be a comparison between the mass exodus of Russian citizens in 2022 and various forms of transient migration, for instance the numerous movements of refugees who stay for years at deliberately temporary places on their route, or a completely different case of the transient living of digital nomads and downshifters wintering in Thailand. The perception of the new space as transient is typical for respondents in both the South Caucasus and Turkey. Rapoport’s respondents use the metaphor of limbo, a transitory place between life and death, an unreal space. Other researchers also use this term to interpret the new migration wave, for instance in the study of the reflections of those who left in the media interviews and blogs (Prashizky 2023).

Despite the transient state and uncertainty, new emigrants get involved in the production of locality. Considering the essential aspects of locality, Arjun Appadurai notes that in order to produce it, there has to be an appropriation of space, people, and customs, which in turn are “colonized” (Appadurai 2018). Observations of community life show how “locality” is reconstructed on the bases of appropriation or participation, for instance, through the creation of new spaces or the introduction of practices of interaction with urban environment familiar to city dwellers: voluntary community work, waste sorting, or sterilization of stray animals (essay by Baranova and Podolsky). Liubov Chernysheva’s essay addresses the applicability of the concept of “the right to the city” to such migration and shows its close connection with hierarchies between groups and ideas of social equity, into which high-status migrants fit less well.

The small block of three essays does not claim to give a complete description of the new migration, but rather identifies emerging issues and outlines topics for future research. All three texts in one way or another address the issues of migrant identity, including the issues of naming the current migration wave. In particular, Chernysheva

considers different categorizations (“tourists,” “digital nomads,” “migrants”) as possible lenses that do or do not give a group the right to the city. These external frameworks, on the part of researchers and the host community, set the system of relationships and hierarchies within which Russian migrants are perceived. No less important is the issue of self-esteem of the group, that is, taxonomy reflecting the identity of migrants (see essays by Rapoport and by Baranova and Podolsky).

As mentioned above, the essays show the heterogeneity of the migrant community, highlighting the diversity both among individuals and of the current social roles or narratives within one person. Instead of attempting to find a definition for the group as a whole, Chernysheva suggests paying attention to the differences and contextuality of these differences. Baranova and Podolsky address manifestations of identity through narratives (descriptions of departure and plans for the future), as well as the practices of civic participation in the new country.

All essays were written based on the fieldwork carried out in 2022, that is, right after the beginning of the mass emigration. Due to this, they reflect the first stage of the mass migration: justification of migration decisions, of which the respondents are often unsure, the emotional perception of departure and of the new environment. In a nutshell, the essays explore the context for what Rapoport calls a “shock wave” of migration. These essays are a kind of a snapshot of the initial stage of an ongoing process. The actual situation, in particular the number of emigrants, can change drastically, and is partly changing already. For instance, presently there is an emerging outflow of Russian citizens from Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. In the migration routes of Rapoport’s respondents, the final destination is usually one of the countries of the Global North. With time, the real long-term effects of the continued migration will become evident for the host and source countries. The attempts to describe the migration processes, offered to the attention of readers, provide an opportunity to see how new groups and their boundaries are formed, as well as to take a fresh look at some research concepts.

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