

LIFE IN MOTION: MOBILITY AND IDENTITY AMONG RUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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The South Caucasus has emerged as a prominent destination for migrants from Russia following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The essay highlights both the complex and heterogeneous nature of current migration from Russia to the South Caucasus and the challenges inherent in categorizing and grouping diverse migrant communities. Describing the identity of migrants, we focus on the actual moment of moving from Russia to Armenia or Georgia, living in these countries, and the panorama of staying, returning, or leaving for a third place.

Many people from the current wave of migration are engaged in remote work, primarily in the IT sector, and have a relatively high income compared to the host community. This trend to seek temporary residence in countries with milder climates and lower living costs, combined with remote work opportunities, is shared by lifestyle migrants, winter tourists, digital nomads, and Russians who fled in 2022. Looking at such new types of migration, researchers have criticized the privilege and inequality of this lifestyle, as well as their weak involvement in the local agenda. However, it is noteworthy that these communities of migrants are characterized by practices of mutual assistance and a commitment to ecological values, which in turn foster attention to the local environment. The essay describes volunteer practices and explores the concept of disengagement from civic life inherent in lifestyle migration or nomadism.

Keywords: War; Identity; Migrants from Russia; Armenia; Georgia; Digital Nomads; Location Independence; Local Activism

This essay is based on the work of Exodus-22 (formerly After24), an informal community of social researchers who relocated to Armenia and Georgia in the spring of 2022 (some members of our group have moved since elsewhere or are in the process of moving and crossing various borders). Being part of the massive wave of migration

that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we tried to understand the processes at play, in part to ground our own faltering understanding of social reality and to make sense of our identities. This resulted in fascinating discussions with our respondents, who had different understandings of mobility and migration, in the face of rapidly changing realities and emerging trajectories of displacement.

Different sources provide different figures for the number of people who left Russia in 2022, from a few hundred thousand to a million, with the most balanced count, based on host country data, standing at about 800,000 (Shirmanova 2023). Such a discrepancy, surprising in the age of digital surveillance, is characteristic of this wave of migration, which is turning out to be extremely fluid and uncertain, eluding both official counting and simple explanation. Should only those who left without returning to Russia within six months (the deadline for determining tax residency) be included in this migration wave? Many migrants left in March or September 2022 in a hurry and then returned for brief stays to settle matters with documents, business, or real estate, so departure without return is not a criterion, and neither is a period of six months. Some migrants left for a specific country, with plans to stay for the foreseeable future, while others moved between several countries throughout 2022.

An interesting feature of this migration is that it quickly became the subject of intense study and policy papers, largely because a significant number of social researchers were themselves among those who left. Publications by the research group OutRush, based on surveys of migrants to different countries, present a comprehensive picture (Kamalov et al. 2022). Others focus on specific diasporas in particular countries, such as Turkey (see the essay by Eva Rapoport in this volume), or on specific aspects of migration, such as political participation—both in the general context of emigration (Kamalov et al. 2023) and in the context of the South Caucasus specifically (Krawatzek, DeSisto, and Soroka 2023), or economic strategies of Russian migrants in the South Caucasus (Baranova et al. 2023).

The South Caucasus has emerged as a prominent destination for migrants from Russia following the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. There are several factors that make Armenia and Georgia attractive destinations, including the lack of visa restrictions for Russian citizens, enabling them to enjoy tourist stays of up to six months in Armenia and up to a year in Georgia. The 2022 migration has happened in two waves: first in the spring, at the very beginning of the war, and then in the fall, caused by military mobilization. For the second wave, countries with land borders with Russia, such as Kazakhstan and Mongolia, became important destinations. However, Armenia and Georgia continued to be significant migration destinations throughout 2022 and 2023. As indicated by survey data gathered by our research team, these waves of migration in Armenia and Georgia did not differ significantly from each other (Exodus-22 2023).

This essay draws on various materials, but primarily it is based on interviews with migrants from Russia to Georgia and Armenia conducted in the summer–fall of 2022. Most of the interviews were with people who moved in the spring of 2022 and had already lived in Armenia and Georgia for some time, and we focused on their

post-migration experiences (the total number of interviews was 50, but only about 30 were used for this essay). The interviews of individuals who moved after the mobilization were used for context, since their narratives primarily pertain to the recent move. This is because at the time of our research, they had not been in Armenia or Georgia long enough to have sufficient time to reflect on their lives in these countries. Other sources used for this study are offline and online observations in Armenia during spring–summer 2022 and in Armenia and Georgia in December 2022. Living in these countries themselves, members of the research team did participatory observation of different migrant practices and read public chats and private groups on Telegram. We also relied on the surveys conducted in Armenia and Georgia by Exodus-22 (two waves, in March–May and November–December 2022).

As mentioned above, migrants of different waves are quite close to each other in terms of sociodemographic status (Exodus-22 2023). Our survey indicates that over half of the respondents who relocated in the spring of 2022 are engaged in remote work, working primarily in the IT sector (Baranova et al. 2023). Thus, the understanding of *mobility* is quite specific to this group, many of whose members enjoy certain privileges. However, it is important to note that migration can be fundamentally heterogeneous, and individuals may gravitate toward one type or another. So, for example, migrants to the South Caucasus chose different economic strategies: keeping their previous income and job in Russia, searching for a new job in the same professional field, changing their profession, or opening or relocating their business (Baranova et al. 2023).

We explore these different types of migration in more detail below. It is important that respondents who found themselves in relatively similar contexts conceptualize their migration differently. During interviews, they called themselves “emigrants,” sometimes “relocants,” or, more often, just avoided labels and referred to the group as *uekhavshie* (departed, those who moved) or *russkie* (Russians). The term “relocants” was very popular in both Russian and host countries’ media and on Telegram in spring 2022, but it is not commonly used by those who left Russia for the South Caucasus.¹ It is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of discourses and their situational use. Even those who moved due to company relocation may use metaphors of homelessness, asylum, or political emigration. Rather than seeking simple answers as to why they left (beyond the obvious in 2022), this essay aims to demonstrate the diversity of mobility types and attitudes among respondents.

This essay tackles a broad research question: How do Russians who left for Georgia and Armenia in 2022 perceive their departure, and how do they identify themselves? We explore how they define moving and temporary or permanent residence and how they relate these terms to their experience of living in Armenia and Georgia. While identities are often considered through definitions, it is important to remember that they have a fundamentally situational nature and the meaning of a new term is constructed by speakers in relation to certain moments. Thus, we focus on contexts of moving or living in a new place where participants use terminology related

¹ In Uzbekistan, migrants call themselves *relokanty* (Elena Borisova, personal communication).

to mobility (emigration, relocation, moving, departure, refugee, journey, etc.) and explain their meanings and practices. We examine several key points, including the actual moment of spatial displacement from Russia to Armenia or Georgia, living in these countries, and the panorama of staying, returning, or leaving for a third place.

IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES, "RELOCANTS," DIGITAL NOMADS

The accepted categorizations partly correlate with larger social or professional groups. The departure in 2022 continued the "political exodus" that had begun in 2012 and included students, civic activists, and middle-class professionals² (Fomina 2021:64). However, the majority of those who left in 2022, in particular after the start of the mobilization, did not plan to end up where they did within that time frame. Willingness to call one's situation emigration is very subjective and varies greatly, even within the same group, such as civic activists and employees of NGOs. The uncertainty of status is caused, of course, by the dynamic situation, which is beyond the control of those who left: the transformation of political and economic realities in Russia, as well as changes in conditions in the host societies. What is important, however, is that the respondents in relatively similar circumstances conceptualize their departure in different ways.

The migration that occurred in 2022, although not classified as refugee relocation in the literal sense, shares many characteristics with forced migration, which is typically associated with refugees or political emigrants. For instance, informants left hastily and were often unable to prepare for their departure or pack their belongings. They are unsure if and when they can return and experience a partial loss of their social status. However, it is important to note that refugee status confers a special legal status, which is not common for the respondents in Armenia and Georgia, and therefore in interviews they did not associate themselves with the term "refugee":

Respondent: I am an emigrant or an expat. These are probably the words I associate myself with at the moment. We wanted to become refugees, but that is an official term to use if, for example, you are truly a refugee for political reasons. And we didn't do that. I still don't know why we didn't, but that's how it happened. And it turns out that both terms fit me—emigrant and expat.

Interviewer: And what did you want to do with the refugee status?

Respondent: Well, I was just thinking about getting a residence permit as a refugee, but it had to be done right away. We have been living without it for a long time [approx. six months], and someone would ask us, "Why didn't you do it right away?" And we would be like, "Are we refugees enough or not?" It would have been weird, but it's no big deal. In fact, so far we have managed with immigrant status, and we're fine. (female respondent, approx. 25, Georgia)

² This is true for the region in question, the South Caucasus, but is different for migration in 2022 to Central Asia or Mongolia (see Jonutyte 2023).

Only one respondent applied for temporary asylum in Georgia, but later withdrew their application:

Well, I wrote to Georgia and asked the UN, like, do they have asylum? . . . They said that it was kind of humanitarian, you can get asylum, apply for asylum; they sent me the address, phone number and said, come and you can go to the address or directly to the border. Here. I came to Georgia, lived here for some time and went to the migration center. . . . I went there with this paper, and they took my photo, and I filled out documents with all my information. And they said that they would give me a temporary ID. They gave me the same rights as the locals, but they prohibited me from leaving the country. It embarrassed me very much that while the application is being processed you may not leave the country. I met some people who were here for the first time, and they told me they've been living in the country for two years and they can't leave the country. And they are still waiting for their application to be processed. (female respondent, 26, Georgia)

So since Russian citizens can live in Georgia without a visa and registration for 360 days, asylum status only restricts a migrant. This option was not even mentioned by people who applied for a humanitarian visa to the EU, primarily Germany, or were allowed to apply for temporary asylum in Europe.

As already mentioned, professional group that constitutes a significant part of the current migration is the IT specialists (*aitishniki*). According to our survey, 45 percent of respondents who moved in the spring of 2022 (Baranova et al. 2023) and 39.5 percent of those who moved after the beginning of mobilization work in the IT sector. For some of them, their current departure from Russia continues the trend of working remotely while living in places like Cyprus or Thailand, what is close to the so-called digital nomadism (Cook 2020; Thompson 2021). Technological developments have led to a weakening of the link between work and the physical location of the employee, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when many types of white-collar professionals worked remotely (Hermann and Paris 2020). Digital nomads choose locations with a good climate that provide maximum benefits for their work (Thompson 2019), as well as with the infrastructure for remote work. During the past year, new reasons for digital nomadism emerged: digital nomads have the opportunity to be someplace other than Russia.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian employees of international IT companies who previously worked in Russia have moved, similarly to digital nomads, and often ended up in the same countries with them, notably Georgia and Armenia. Many international companies relocated their staff due to possible sanctions for continuing their work in Russia and to limited access to various software products, among other reasons. The use of the terms *relokanty* (relocants) and *ekspaty* (expats) in the Russian-speaking media reflects higher economic status and cultural capital of migrants compared to the host community. However, despite the significant number of employees who relocated with their companies, the reasons for departure are usually cited as circumstances in Russia (see figure 1).

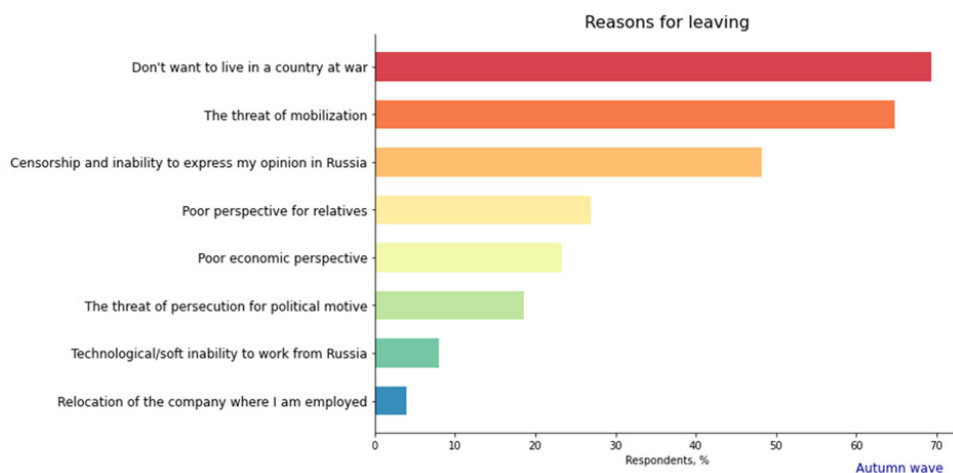


Figure 1. Reasons for leaving Russia, Exodus-22 survey, November–December 2022 (respondents could choose multiple answers).

According to their survey responses, the situation of IT professionals and others who left Russia in 2022 only partially follows the trend of digital nomadism and the flexible and nonlocal character of the employment of IT specialists. Their reasons for departure are more heterogeneous and often are closer to political emigration. In interviews, people also reflect on the applicability of the terms “expats” and “relocants”: “But ‘expat’ is actually a word originally used for people who moved abroad for reasons of work. Many IT professionals moved here with their companies for economic reasons, and they can be called expats. However, now it has become customary to refer to everyone who has moved here as an expat. Thus, we have expat bars, expat places, and so on. However, the majority of people who have moved here are not expats, but rather political emigrants” (female respondent, approx. 30, Georgia). How do those who have remote work opportunities, in particular those who identify themselves as digital nomads, discuss and conceptualize their departure from Russia?

This direction of migration, from the former center of the empire to the former colonies, is new. In previous decades there was a large labor migration from Armenia and Georgia to Russia. Often, locals in the South Caucasus refer to newcomers from Russia as a tourist flow. The closeness of middle-class migration to tourism is typical in different areas. Digital nomads (Thompson 2019) and representatives of lifestyle migration (Benson and O’Reilly 2016, 2018; Korpela 2014, 2019) reproduce middle-class practices and consumption patterns common within the sending community. “DownshifTERS” (lifestyle migrants) simultaneously reject capitalism and practice prestige consumption in India (Korpela 2010) without noticing the internal contradiction of practices and discourses. These traits can also be observed in the migration from Russia, but participants’ own assessments emphasize the need for decolonial reflection and analysis of social (in)justice. Russians who fled in 2022 are similar to lifestyle migrants in that they come to countries with milder climates, less urbanization, and a lower cost of living. To understand the nature of this migration wave,

we decided to focus on the largest group of migrants—people with remote work opportunities, typically IT professionals. These individuals share some similarities with digital nomads, although some of our respondents did not self-identify as such. Our primary focus, however, was not on general declarative formulations of identity, but on two levels at which this identity manifests itself: the *discourse* framing departure and plans for the near future (i.e., context-specific discourse) and partly the *practices* in a new country, for example, civic engagement.

By discussing respondents' departure, plans in the new country, anticipated period of life there, as well as any further moves or potential return to Russia, we aim to examine the terminology and categories that respondents use to describe their situation and attitudes toward the host community and Russian society. Our starting point is that it is more fruitful to take into account the situational nature of migrant groups and to consider them as fundamentally heterogeneous, consisting of individuals who use different conceptualizations in different contexts.

Another crucial area of focus is to examine the respondents' involvement in participatory practices in their host country. It should be noted that the current wave of migration includes both citizens who are highly involved in civic processes and organizations and those who represent the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of civic participation: as the interviews show, most digital nomads (or other IT specialists) before the war avoided involvement in political issues at any cost.

In general, such attitude is typical for digital nomads in different countries: civic participation is not an important consideration for them. In fact, they often disengage from politics of a particular state and attempt to de-territorialize their lives and focus on work as much as possible; for some digital nomads the so-called location independence is an important characteristic (Mancinelli 2020:425). For example, there is a tendency to connect digital nomads' individualism and noninvolvement in political and civic life, as the desire to be "place independent" is often associated with freedom and adventure (Hermann and Paris 2020). Erika Polson states that location independence "means taking for granted the privilege to imagine stepping into and experiencing other worlds—worlds that others have labored to produce and maintain" (2019:168). So the question of involvement and participation is highly topical for understanding digital nomads and other privileged group of migrants, lifestyle migrants, or winter tourists. By examining their civic participation, we aim to illustrate the identity of migrants: how they structure their lives in a new place, and whether they participate in social life or choose to avoid it.

DISCOURSES OF MOBILITY: DEPARTURE AND RETURN

How thought-through or planned the departure was for migrants from Russia varies quite a lot. On the one hand, numerous respondents stated that they had been contemplating migration in recent years or even had taken concrete steps and that the outbreak of war simply hastened their departure.

Yes, maybe that's why I made up my mind easily—I had thought [about it], but I had thought that I would leave in a year. Here I wanted to save some money, to sit. Maybe, with the same job, to move. I wanted to go to Portugal, but it was all the same. Now I understand that it wasn't very conscious anyway. I mean, I wanted to, but I also sometimes thought that maybe I would never move. I thought about moving, but somehow I didn't really want to move. (female respondent, 30, Armenia)

For the 2022 migrants the departure could be delayed (due to the different reasons, such as documents, for example) or hurried: "After the mobilization started, I went abroad as I had planned, just a little earlier (originally I was focused on December–February). Now I am building a life here, working at an IT start-up" (male respondent, approx. 35, Georgia). "On February 25 I realized at once that, well, we all had to move somewhere. . . . I guess I spent those two months hesitating, between thinking that it's time and thinking that maybe some kind of life is possible, and not paying attention. At least to live an ordinary life, like going to the dacha and forgetting about all this for a while" (male respondent, 34, Armenia).

People who already had the experience of living in another country emphasized the advantage of adapting to the current situation:

I continued working, earning my usual income in Dushanbe [in Tajikistan] and spending it [there]; it was convenient and quite doable. I worked every day; it saved me psychologically. That is to say, leaving your job and your family behind was disastrous for the psyche. As a matter of fact, I had lived in the Dominican Republic, Finland, the Baltics, Armenia, and Georgia before that. That is, for me it was actually normal to work from other cities. (male respondent, 49, Georgia)

On the other hand, descriptions of departure depict a tumultuous and often chaotic activity that is frequently seen as an *escape*. "The mobilization was particularly frightening because it seemed impossible to escape and difficult to understand where to go. We had to run while we still could. Well, I guess there wasn't much rationality in that decision" (female respondent, 30, Armenia). "I was running away from the insanity, first of all, of myself. It was all like an escape" (female respondent, approx. 30, Armenia). Images of escape serve to explain why people are not making long-term plans in their host society, as we can see in a Telegram chat: "Just coming here was a choice with no choice—fleeing in October to where we could. If it turns out to be permanent emigration, we'll probably move on [to a different country] in a year or two."

With respect to the "if" in the last excerpt, it is interesting to understand the meaning of "return," a very frequently used word in the migrants' discourse. The respondents perceive the possibility of returning home as something that is beyond their control, similar to dealing with an act of nature. "Would I go back to the Russian Federation? I hope that someday time will come when I realize that I want to go back there. But right now I don't see that happening in the foreseeable future" (female respondent, 25, Armenia). Such situation creates a sense of uncertainty and restlessness. As a result, respondents are unable to exert any influence on their own return,

which is a significant limitation for them and prevents them from fully demonstrating their agency. Instability is both external and internal. The rules for Russian passport holders residing in other countries are constantly changing. Returning to Russia is also uncertain, and most respondents do not have clearly set criteria for the decision to stay or to leave.

It should be noted that people perceived their move differently due to the fluidity of migrants' plans. The attitude of migrants also can change over time. A woman, who had initially moved to Armenia on her husband's request, went "on vacation" to Russia in late fall 2022 and realized that she wanted to stay in Armenia: "my life is already here." However, many others, based on their specific work and family circumstances, had to make difficult decisions about returning to Russia or leaving it multiple times in 2022. For example, a woman who moved to Armenia in spring 2022 with her 20-year-old son and quickly received a residence permit there had to return after a sudden illness of her parents. Moving back and forth every month, she says: "My migration case, it is totally a kind of crazy and abnormal case. I know that there are other people like me who are both here and there. This allows us, on the one hand, to see the bigger picture from two sides. However, the ambiguity of our position is also very disturbing and does not allow us to build a normal life in a new place" (female respondent, 46, Armenia/Russia). Such decisions were an attempt to adapt to changing conditions. Despite this, many people ultimately chose to return to Russia, often because of work, elderly parents, or their children's education. For some, the end of summer was a decisive moment, as factors like the new school year and tax residency deadlines forced them to make a more "final" decision about leaving or returning. However, the possibility or impossibility of returning was often beyond their control, limiting their agency and decision-making abilities.

DISCOURSES AND PARTICIPATION PRACTICES, OR "WE ARE GOING TO ARGENTINA, BUT FOR NOW WE LIVE HERE"

Migrants from Russia largely did not see Armenia and Georgia as desirable destinations. They describe their move to one of these countries as an exogenous necessity rather than a choice: "There was no choice here. That is to say, I had no choice. My evacuation took place in such a hurry" (female respondent, age unknown, Armenia). "I originally wanted to go to Georgia, but getting to Georgia was complicated. Georgia, Turkey. . . There were still tickets to Armenia, a friend rented a hostel for a week—that is, I had a planning horizon of really just a week. I was like, well, I'll just run over there" (female respondent, 30, Armenia). However, the fact that they did not always consciously choose the country of their current residence does not necessarily mean that they plan to return or move further. Some migrants express a desire to settle in their new country, as evidenced by a respondent above who is considering taking out a mortgage and planning to stay for at least a year in Armenia.

Is their departure from Russia emigration? Some people tend to see it that way: "But usually we call ourselves emigrants. We are emigrants. This word still has such an loaded political connotation. In my mind, emigrants are people who left for po-

litical reasons. So, yes, *emigrants*" (female respondent, 23, Georgia). Some respondents prefer to avoid the word "emigration" (*emigratsiia*), but they emphasize that they are staying abroad long-term: "So, in principle, you could say that I'm finally not moving, not for a while. For years, maybe a decade, or decades" (male respondent, 39, Georgia). Other respondents are not sure; a woman living in Armenia for half a year uses terms that refer to temporary status ("refugee," "travel"):

I don't call myself anything. But if I have to choose, I guess it's still a "refugee," [we are] refugees. Well, because I said that so far, despite the fact that it's been some six months—it will be soon—I consider it as an extended journey [*zatiianuvsheesia puteshestvie*] so far. Well, I understand that there are people who decided for themselves that they are gone and they are done with Russia forever. But I think it is easier for them because they have cut themselves off [from Russia] and are building a new life. I haven't made that decision yet. (female respondent, age unknown, Armenia)

Life in Armenia and Georgia as a transit point option gives many people time to understand what their next steps should be. Many migrants have previously moved from Armenia and Georgia to other destinations such as Europe, Latin America, or popular lifestyle destinations like Bali and Thailand. "I am planning to go to Southeast Asia for the winter. For now, I'm planning to go to Sri Lanka mainly just because I love the heat, and I figured since I don't have a homeland now, at least I can live where it's warm and the produce is fresh" (male respondent, 32, Georgia).

When discussing their plans, migrants highlight the high level of uncertainty surrounding external circumstances, which are largely beyond their control. As mentioned above, this uncertainty comes from both the sending and receiving communities, which creates a double uncertainty for some migrants. As a result, many describe their current situation as being ready to adapt to any changes or to move to a different location if necessary:

I don't plan to [move], but I can never tell if it's for sure or not. I am not afraid of the world at all. I think that a person who is used to working and, well, more or less has a brain and at the same time understands that if you go somewhere, you don't have to bring your monastery with you—that you have to adapt to the circumstances that are there, to the way people live—then I absolutely don't rule anything out. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. Maybe after two months they will decide that we need visas here and will not give them [to us], for example, and will say, that's it, let's go. . . (female respondent, 48, Georgia)

In the interview excerpt above, the person's self-identification as a citizen of the world and *readiness to move* are extremely important. At the same time, a similar sense of willingness to move arises in interviews with people who had led settled lives before 2022 and did not move even within Russia, but having now found themselves in this state of motion, they are fully prepared to continue it. "I think I'll go to Georgia now in August or in September, I don't know, I'll go, I'll. . . I'll see what's

there, some other places. Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, I want to, no specific plans” (male respondent, 34, Armenia).

This life in transit is discussed in the context of digital nomadism. Some people move hastily and without thinking, not anticipating that they would become nomads. Once they have left, they either consciously decide to continue traveling or it happens spontaneously. One may be surprised when one finds oneself falling into this pattern of behavior and embracing this lifestyle. “I thought it was terribly expensive to be this nomad and I couldn’t afford it. That’s why working from other countries was something I hadn’t thought about before. In fact, it turned out that working and living from other countries can be no more expensive and in some places even cheaper. That is, it is cheaper in Turkey and in Armenia than in Russia. And I can’t understand whether it is cheaper here or whether there is just less to spend [compared to the previous period]” (female respondent, approx. 25, Armenia).

Despite the temporary and uncertain nature of staying in Armenia and Georgia, migrants from Russia actively create networks within the migrant community. Trust and mutual help are typical for the current wave of Russian migration (Kamalov et al. 2023). The so-called Dilijan care community that we studied is an example of such unity, as it was created by migrants with experience in volunteer work and social movements. While its core members cautiously assume they will live in this Armenian city for “at least a year” (but not for the rest of their lives), many migrants, even those typically seen as apolitical digital nomads, participate in the community’s activities. Their work includes sterilizing and vaccinating homeless dogs, animal treatment, regular Sunday garbage collections, sorting garbage, as well as fundraising for refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, charity donation for the locals, and even a short-lived initiative to provide shelter for those fleeing mobilization in Russia. An initiative in Georgia, Tbilisi Cleanups, started in spring 2022, soon after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. It organizes cleanups of neighborhoods in Tbilisi by picking a location, providing instructions, and organizing people for the effort. It not only educates individuals about environmental conservation, but also fosters a sense of community involvement and participation. Katya Chigaleichik (n.d.) has also discovered many migrants in Georgia participate in civic activism. These civic activism projects often involve mixed teams of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, and others.

Some of these projects, whose development we observed from May to December 2022, were more successful or popular than others. For example, blood donations for victims of the September 2022 shelling in Jermuk, Armenia, near the border with Azerbaijan, have ended, and free shelter for those who left Russia without sufficient funds has been discontinued or turned into housing strictly for political migrants. However, other projects are developing and finding support from or partnerships with the host community. For example, the sterilization program and the veterinary clinic in Dilijan were realized in cooperation with the TUMO Center and their grant to solve the problem of stray animals. Sorted garbage was picked up by trucks provided by the municipality, after a meeting with the city’s mayor. These projects simultaneously existed somewhat isolated from the host community and raised questions about why

Russians were so involved with pets, waste sorting, and so on, but gradually gained a place in the city. The most striking example of support for migrants' initiatives was the participation of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in the garbage collection organized by migrants in Dilijan on March 26, 2023 (Armenpress 2023).

On the level of both discourse and practice, we observed opposite coping strategies regarding the stress of sudden migration. All respondents perceive their recent departure as an uncertain and transitory situation. They do not yet understand their new status or know how their life is going to turn out. Some respond to this by creating social connections, seeking support and friendly contacts with other migrants, participating in the life of the host community, and engaging in practices of civic participation. However, when asked directly where they plan to live in the future, they respond rather vaguely. The other position involves disengaging from the state and, consequently, from commitments to civic participation. It involves life in transit, which is characteristic of lifestyle migrants and digital nomads.

DIGITAL NOMADS AND OTHER PEOPLE ON THE MOVE: WHAT HAS CHANGED IN 2022?

Remote workers (*udalenshchiki*), "winter tourists, snowbirds" (*zimovshchiki*), and nomads (*kochevniki*) have been relocating to work on ocean shores or ski resorts long before 2020 (the COVID-19 pandemic) and 2022 (Russia's invasion of Ukraine). In many places that attracted digital nomads even before the pandemic, the economic situation has worsened, lowering the cost of living and therefore making such countries even more attractive for people with remote jobs (e.g., Turkey), and the political situation in the countries of origin of many nomads has become more tense (Russia, Belarus). Wars, like epidemics, accelerate and catalyze social processes. They shut down some countries, accelerate the globalization of others, and increase the level of stress and the number of restrictions with which one must comply. Therefore, the number of nomads all over the world has also increased. Nomad List (nomadlist.com), a major online resource for digital nomads, keeps statistics on nomadism worldwide based on data collected from their registered users. Since Nomad List membership is paid, the collected data is biased toward people who are willing and able to pay for it, which is usually nomad workers from more affluent countries. Nevertheless, the number of digital nomads from Russia grew from 1 percent of registered users to 5 percent on this resource in 2022, moving Russia into third place (after the United States and Britain) for the number of nomads from that country.

In 2022, there were many people for whom instability was stressful. There were those who were willing to give up control of their lifestyle for the sake of stability: "I'm no longer a nomad, although I would like to be. The company moved me to Serbia, and for the next few months I will live and work from here. I hope they will trust me more and let me travel more," shares a business analyst, who back in February 2022 said that when choosing a job, she looked first and foremost at the possibility of moving regularly (female respondent, approx. 27, Armenia and other countries).

Some of the respondents do not consider the change in their life as radical: “What changed after the war, particularly in relation to nomadism, was that I stopped visiting Russia. In the past, flights were often arranged in such a way that I flew somewhere, then flew back to Russia, even for a couple of days, saw people, changed clothes, took some other things with me, and flew on. That’s it. I used to go back once a month. Now I’ve stopped doing that. In July I was gone for a while, but now instead of Russia, my base, where I come to see people and change things, is Armenia” (female respondent, 25, Armenia).

On closer examination, however, the situation appears to be more complex, and the nonparticipation of digital nomads is not so straightforward. The reasons why people choose to combine work and travel go beyond just the opportunity to do so. Constantly moving from country to country, searching for housing, booking flights, and dealing with paperwork can be a tedious task, but people are willing to do it in order to experience a variety of lifestyles. However, many digital nomads also feel safer or better off without the pressure of the news about the war and political issues. By swapping civic engagement with agency in “lifestyle design,” digital nomads distance themselves from involvement in the affairs of their home country and often neglect engagement in the host country, sometimes even avoiding local news. “When I was in Sri Lanka during the demonstrations, and we were asked not to leave the hotel for our safety, I felt zero empathy toward that country” (female respondent, approx. 30, Armenia). However, they come together in small expat communities to satisfy their need for belonging and participation. These communities organize various activities, such as rallies, collecting humanitarian aid for refugees from Ukraine and/or Nagorno-Karabakh, hosting letter-writing evenings for political prisoners, participating in eco-activism, or establishing various initiatives. Migrants open new places (cafes, coworking spaces, and bars function as full-fledged social hubs for migrants) or gather at various public venues for educational lectures and classes for both children and adults, sports, hobbies, and so on.

Despite the fact that many nomads prefer to remain apolitical (as one respondent said, “don’t waste resources on things you can’t influence”), some have developed an interest in civic initiatives, mostly directed to the development of digital nomad community. For example, a respondent has created a Telegram channel with information and support for IT specialists who want to move. She states that she has changed her attitudes and become more involved than before: “I think that if it were not for the war, the mobilization, I would hardly think of creating a channel to help people with advice. And, therefore, to conduct business among the relocated people in Yerevan, too” (female respondent, approx. 25, Armenia). Some respondents have abandoned their previous lack of interest in politics and developed an interest in staying informed about current events. This is reflected in their newfound habit of reading news and following social media posts shared by friends. “I read the Armenian news, and I empathize a lot,” says the nomadic woman who remained indifferent to the problems of Sri Lankans. Another nomad noted that this change in interest may be due to the environment they find themselves in, as there are now many people with similar interests:

What has changed in terms of my identity is that my interest in politics has grown. Before, it wasn't that I didn't care; I guess I just didn't know anything about what was going on, where it was happening, or why. I didn't read news in any way, and in short, I didn't click on news stories on social media when I saw something like that. Now, I can't say that I delve as deep into any issues as some friends who read military analysis or something like that, but I have developed a particular interest in knowing what's going on. And generally, getting and remembering some information is definitely happening a lot more. Perhaps this change has also come about because of my environment. I think there are a lot of people like me now, who have had an unexpected political event in their lives, and who repost news here. (female respondent, 30, Armenia)

Despite these newfound interests, many nomads remain focused on their personal lives and families and prefer not to get involved in politics or civic initiatives. While some have even begun to attend rallies and write letters to political prisoners, the opposite trajectory also occurs, albeit it is less common. For example, one respondent who had been actively involved in political life in Russia became disillusioned with everything once he moved from Moscow to Tbilisi and is no longer interested in politics.

CONCLUSION

How should we define the current wave of migration from Russia to the South Caucasus? It is important to note that the categories are very fluid and contextual and can change over time. Migrants themselves may also use categories in speech with which they may not agree in principle. Many emphasize that they do not yet understand their status and struggle to find a suitable self-identification that reflects their identity.

We found that returning home and building a new life are (still?) perceived by these individuals as something beyond their control, like an act of nature they cannot influence. This limits their agency and prevents them from being fully self-determined, especially in their activity directed at their native country (e.g., donating money to political and civic organizations deemed "undesirable" by the Russian government and so on). Nevertheless, people are engaged in local activism in their current countries of residence and support social networks and solidarity among migrants. Taking part in various initiatives often helps people who have recently left Russia, as it simultaneously establishes social connections and gives them a sense of belonging.

Everyone experiences uncertainty. However, in the face of uncertainty, people adopt different strategies. Some opt to travel and explore, while others prefer to put down roots in one place and engage in the social life of the migrant community. Although there are no certainties for anyone, what matters most is how a person acts and their ability to choose an area where to apply themselves that aligns with their values, such as ecology, caring for homeless pets, or politics.

This study underscores both the complex and heterogeneous nature of present-day migration and the challenges inherent in categorizing and grouping diverse migrant communities as a cohesive whole.

On one hand, participants in the current wave of migration from Russia make decisions that vary from person to person. Their descriptions of experiences, plans, and identities might change based on their emotional state and individual circumstances. Their departure from Russia can combine features of different kinds of mobility: emigration, privileged migration of digital nomads, and refugee flight. For the participants themselves, these and other categories are situational. Consequently, choosing a single category to describe the current wave of migration is almost impossible, as it consists of different people categorizing their migration experiences differently at different times. The explanation for this can be found in the complex nature of this migration and intertwinement of different circumstances, above all the paradoxical combination of forced departure from Russia and their privileged status.

On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that the very categories of our analytical apparatus are rather conventional. One section of the essays explored the concept of digital nomads' location independency, suggesting their disengagement from local life (Polson 2019). However, other studies highlight mutual support among nomads and the "sustainability of the whole digital nomad ecosystem" (De Almeida et al. 2022:3354). For instance, a respondent in Armenia created a telegram channel for fellow digital nomads, showing a sense of "care of place" by establishing coworking spaces (cf. Liegl and Bender 2016). Additionally, there is emphasis on the social responsibility of digital nomads in some research (Mourato, Dias, and Pereira 2023). Thus, it is important to problematize the very categories we use to describe migration in different contexts.

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ЖИЗНЬ В ДВИЖЕНИИ: МОБИЛЬНОСТЬ И ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ РОССИЙСКИХ МИГРАНТОВ НА ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ

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Южный Кавказ стал важным направлением для российских мигрантов после полномасштабного вторжения России в Украину в феврале 2022 года. В данном эссе подчеркиваются разнообразие текущей миграции из России в Армению и Грузию, а также сложности, связанные с категоризацией и номинацией недавно возникших и/или возникающих мигрантских сообществ. При описании идентичности мигрантов делаются акценты на моменте переезда на Южный Кавказ, жизни в новых странах и планах пребывания, возвращения или переезда в третье место.

Многие мигранты текущей волны заняты удаленной работой – в основном в сфере информационных технологий – и имеют относительно высокий доход по сравнению с населением принимающих стран. Такое проживание, зачастую временное, в странах с мягким климатом и более низкой стоимостью жизни семантически сближает нынешних мигрантов из России с лайфстайл-мигрантами, сезонными туристами и цифровыми кочевниками. Подобный образ жизни нередко критикуется местными жителями с позиций привилегий и неравенства, а также невключенности соседей-иностранцев в локальный контекст. Между тем важно отметить, что изучаемые мигрантские сообщества характеризуются в том числе практиками взаимопомощи и приверженностью экологическим ценностям, что в свою очередь способствует их вниманию к местной среде. В эссе описываются волонтерские практики новых мигрантов, а также исследуется концепция (не)включенности и (не)принятия участия, присущая миграции как образу жизни или цифровому кочевничеству.

Ключевые слова: война; идентичность; российские эмигранты; Армения; Грузия; цифровые кочевники; независимость от места; локальный активизм