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Between the Individual and the Collective: Identity Dilemmas of Russian Migrants after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Sample Research in Poland and Germany

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused a sharp increase in migration not only from the war-torn Ukraine but also from Russia. According to various estimates, about one million citizens left the Russian Federation (Ebel & Ilyushina, 2023; Kiseleva & Safronova, 2023; Zavadskaya, 2023). The majority of wartime émigrés fled to nearby destination countries, including but not limited to Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, while a smaller number went further, relocating to countries in the EU,

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Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Although many of those migrants returned to Russia,¹ it is certain that we are dealing with a new wave of political emigration and a somewhat new socio-cultural phenomenon. Considering the role of modern communication technologies, we can see new Russian émigrés as a “digital diaspora” (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Ponzanesi, 2020), using modern digital tools for communication, organizing themselves, and expressing their opposition to the regime in their country of origin. Some migrants of the new wave feel traumatized by the loss of their homeland: not by the fact that they had to leave it, but by the fact that it was “taken away” from them (in this context, comparisons to the so-called White emigration after 1917 appear). They attempt to build a new identity, one that does not refer to state-national categories, which is an important qualitative difference compared to earlier migration waves.

Considering the wartime migration from Russia, two main waves of departures can be distinguished: immediately after February 24, 2022, following the beginning of full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and after September 21, 2022, following the announcement of mobilization in Russia. While those two waves are usually considered different, with the first consisting of politically active opponents of the Kremlin regime, and the second – mainly of men avoiding the risk of conscription, both groups seem to have been motivated to flee, in part, for “moral reasons” (Sergeeva & Kamalov, 2024, p. 21). The main difference between “Februarists” and “Septembrists”, as they are referred to, seems to lie in the individuals’ financial status (Jerstad et al., 2024). Crucial factors for emigration were, obviously, foreign passport and/or visa,² financial means for the journey, chances of continuing to work remotely or finding new employment abroad, foreign language skills, and family or social contacts with people living outside Russia. “Septembrists” most often made their decision impulsively and therefore chose countries where Russians did not require a visa to enter or could obtain it on simple terms, such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Turkey, or Southeast Asian countries. Those who chose the western direction of emigration were mostly people privileged in social and economic terms compared to their fellow citizens.

Our research focused on Russian migrants in Poland and Germany, and thus mainly concerned individuals from the first wave (“Februarists”), and those who arrived in the EU

¹ It is estimated that 650,000 Russian émigrés remain abroad; see Krawatzek and Sasse (2024).

² In 2022, only 29 percent of Russians had a passport, and only 2 percent of them had a Schengen visa (*Tol’ko 2% oproshennykh rossiian imeiut shengenskuu vizu*, 2022).

prior to February 24, 2022 but did not stay there long enough to obtain permanent residence. All of our interviewees were relatively new expatriates: they were not rooted in their host country sufficiently to feel a part of its society, with their civic rights and residential status secured. According to the data of OutRush group, which has been monitoring and surveying Russian migrants since the outbreak of open war (*OutRush: A research project on Russian emigration*, n.d.), the war migration mainly consists of young people (the average age is 32 years), mostly with higher education (80 percent compared to 27 percent for the entire population of the Russian Federation). In terms of income, these migrants are above average: most of them were employed in the IT sector (46 percent), culture and art (15 percent), office work (17 percent), science and education (14 percent), and journalism (8 percent). They also tend to come from cities with populations of over 500,000 and have broadly liberal views. Over 90 percent emphasized that they are interested in politics, and 55 percent stated they had personally encountered some form of state pressure due to their political activity (Kamalov et al., 2022). Overall, recent émigrés do not resemble the average Russian citizen (Jerstad et al., 2024).

Our interviewees corresponded to the categories outlined by the OutRush project: they were young (mainly in their twenties, with a few people in their late thirties or early forties), originally from cities of 500,000 people or more, educated, and usually with an experience of political or social activism. All of them were, at least in part, ethnically Russian.

In our study, we were interested in their reasons for choosing Poland as a destination country. The history of relations between Poland and Russia is a record of continuous conflicts and a reason behind the accumulation of many mutual negative stereotypes (see Busygina-Wojtas, 2013, 2015). In Russia, Poles are considered Russophobes, an image fueled by Kremlin media propaganda.³ Poland is considered one of the most hostile countries in Russia, with almost three quarters (74 percent) of Russians holding a generally negative attitude towards Poland.⁴ Taking this into consideration, as well as the fact that Poland became the host country to the largest wave of Ukrainian refugees, with Poles collec-

³ Russian state and pro-government media often portray Poland as a country with strong anti-Russian sentiments. Such narratives are part of a broader disinformation campaign aimed at presenting Poland as an enemy of Russia. However, this does not change the fact that Russians are the nationality towards which Poles declare the greatest aversion. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this aversion has significantly increased: according to a CBOS survey conducted in 2025, it is at 72 percent (Omyła-Rudzka, 2025).

⁴ Cf. a Russian public opinion survey: ANO "LEVADA-TSENTR" (*Massovye predstavleniia o druzhestvennykh i nedruzhestvennykh stranakh, otnoshenie k nekotorym stranam*, 2024).

tively supporting Ukraine after February 24, 2022,⁵ the choice of this country as a place of emigration for Russians does not seem obvious. It also implies significant identity-related consequences, which we try to trace in this article.

The research we conducted in Germany was more limited and aimed to provide a comparative material for the Polish study, since the Russian diaspora in Germany (unlike in Poland) has a long history and an established position (Calugher, 2019). Quite opposite to Poland, Germany is considered a highly developed country and a desirable migration destination in Russia (Baklanov, 2017).

Theoretical starting points and ethical issues

Theoretical reference and inspiration for our research comes from the idea of contemporary Russian philosopher Oxana Timofeeva about “plant” and “animal” attachment to the homeland, i.e. through rooting and movement (migration). Timofeeva writes about places that “touch the soul” and then can be recognized as homelands. She examines the relationship with the homeland in reference to Aristotle’s philosophy, who believed that the soul is of three types: vegetative (plant-like), sensitive (animal-like), and rational (human). In this classification, plants only have a vegetative soul, animals – vegetative and sensitive ones, and humans – all three types of souls (Timofeeva, 2020, p. 42). Timofeeva argues that if one combines Aristotle’s and Hegel’s thoughts, the existence of vegetative and sensitive soul in humans can be understood as a dialectical opposition between the desire for expansion and change of place and the desire to stay and settle (Timofeeva, 2020, p. 42). Her words turned out to be prophetic for the current dilemmas of many Russian citizens: to stay or flee, to fight or wait out? The philosopher proposes a way out of this dilemma – to conceal the homeland in your heart and “take it with you wherever you go” (Timofeeva, 2020, p. 55). A distinction emerges between systemic war, conducted by states and declared by authorities, and “guerrilla war” – a grassroots movement of engaged living beings. Homeland is a land of many places. One can leave it, return to it, or find it in another place.

⁵ It is estimated that 77 percent of adult Poles became involved in providing assistance to refugees from Ukraine, and the estimated minimum value of private expenditures that Poles incurred in connection with aid provided to Ukrainian refugees during the first three months following the outbreak of the war amounted to PLN 5.5 billion; cf. Błaszczak et al. (2022, p. 4).

Our research on Russian emigration was conducted at a special moment. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has caused (and continues to deepen) a split within Russian society, and mass emigration is both a manifestation and one of the consequences of this split. The war, still referred to in Russia as the "Special Military Operation" (SMO),⁶ is a significant juncture not only in its political life but also in its socio-cultural existence. Studying the wartime wave of Russian emigration can also help understand these changes, which have consequences both for Russian society and for the societies of the countries hosting Russian migrants.

Studying migrants is a particular challenge, especially in the case of a group associated with aggressive actions (by linking its members to the politics of their country of origin). Despite our declared political neutrality, we were able to reach only those who declared themselves to be against the war and the current regime in Russia. The interviews were conducted mainly in Russian; some interviewees spoke some Polish. In each case, our goal was to show the grassroots perspective, recording the stories of migrants about themselves as citizens of a state conducting full-scale military operations in a neighboring country. The chosen timing of the study – within twelve months from the outbreak of open war – enabled us to obtain accounts characterized by the freshness of impressions, and at the same time an evaluation of the situation from the interviewees' perspective, preceded by longer reflection. To protect the privacy of our interlocutors, in this article their names have been changed.

The consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are an important and current research field. Addressing topics in this field is a challenge for researchers and forces a confrontation not only with the external world being studied but also with the world of their own experiences, especially if the subject of research interest is the less popular side of the conflict. In our case, we need to note our emotional involvement in these studies, related to private relationships connecting us with people from or living in Russia. Aware of how such personal involvement affects the research process, we wish to emphasize the pursuit of objectivity during the study.

In deciding to conduct research among Russian émigrés, we faced a spectrum of emotions and ethical dilemmas concerning the subjects of study, our relationships with them,

⁶ Official (euphemistic) term used by the Russian government to describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The term appears prominently in the public address by President of Russia Vladimir Putin titled "On Conducting a Special Military Operation", televised on February 24, 2022.

and external pressure directed both at the subjects and at us, the researchers, including from the academic community. It is important to highlight this issue because such dilemmas can influence the theoretical and methodological approach of the research conducted or the interpretation of the material obtained.

Research methodology and key research questions

The methodology of the study was based on qualitative methods used in anthropology, such as individual or group in-depth interviews, participant observation, informal conversations, and field notes, as well as the observation of public discourse on migrants in the host country. We aimed to give voice to migrants and to present the issues under study from the bottom-up perspective. The study included the analysis of demographic data from statistical offices, census reports, and other sources, which allowed us to obtain a general picture of the diaspora in sociological terms. However, statistical representativeness is not the goal of the article, which by design presents the micro-world of a migrant.

We reached our interviewees through announcements on online forums for migrants, the “snowball” method, and “key respondents”. The so-called ethnography in action, as one of the research methods, involved spending time among members of the Russian diaspora, including participation in cultural, social, and political events, such as demonstrations, film screenings, discussions, group therapeutic sessions. Social media analysis played a complementary role – studying the diaspora’s online activity, e.g. on social networking sites, discussion forums, or in closed groups. The research questions that accompanied us during our observations and conversations focused on the following issues: What survival strategies are adopted by Russian migrants in a new country after the outbreak of open war? Do ethnic Russian migrants experience any dilemmas related to defining their own identity? Have concepts such as homeland and patriotism changed their meaning for them after February 24, 2022? What is the migrants’ attitude towards their Russianness, the Russian language, and Russian culture? What role do themes of guilt, shame, and responsibility for the actions of their country of origin play in their self-perception?

Our conclusions are based on interviews conducted with Russian migrants in Poland: in Warsaw (capital city) and Tri-City (urban area comprising the Baltic cities of Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot, located relatively close to the Polish-Russian border with the Kaliningrad region), as well as in Germany: Berlin (capital city).

We are aware that the opinions and impressions of our interlocutors presented here constitute a kind of snapshot capturing a fleeting moment in the dynamic situation related to the prolonged military actions of Russia in Ukraine and the consequent political and social reactions of the host countries. Our goal was to capture the moment of identity transformation of our interlocutors, which may serve as a basis (or contrast) for their further perception of themselves, their country of origin, and their position in the host country.

Reasons for choosing Poland as a country of destination

Until recently, the majority of Russian citizens settling in Poland were ethnic Chechens.⁷ This changed in 2022, when ethnic Russians began to predominate. Until the beginning of the war in Ukraine, it was possible to speak of a Russian-speaking diaspora – a community sharing a similar identity and shaped in interaction with the society of the host country (see Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Derlicki, 2013), which included newcomers from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and other former Soviet republics. The country of origin, both in the perception of its members and those outside (Poles), played a lesser role than the sense of cultural and linguistic community of the former USSR area. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 caused a split in this community. It also led to its differentiation in the perception of the host society. This became apparent in a change regarding the use of terminology: while before the war, all Slavic immigrants from the former USSR were often referred to in Polish as *Ruscy* (sing. *Ruski*) – a collective term with a derogatory connotation – since February 2022 this word has been used by Poles essentially only in reference to ethnic Russians, distinguished from other migrants from Eastern Europe.

In the Russian language, one can distinguish *ruskii* and *rossiiskii*, referring respectively to ethnicity/nationality and statehood. This difference becomes blurred in Polish. The Polish language has no distinction between Russian ethnicity and Russian citizenship; they both are referred to using the same Polish term: *Rosjanin*. At the same time, colloquial Polish includes the variant *Ruski*, which does not refer to Russian ethnicity but is rather used for all Russian-speakers, and which has a contemptuous connotation (quite on the contrary to the Russian language, where *ruskii* signifies someone of a higher status than *rossianin*). What is interesting, and what makes the whole linguistic situation even more confusing,

⁷ According to the data of Polish Office for Foreigners – until 2021: 70–90 percent; since 2022: 30 percent.

the Polish adjective *ruski* is considered a neutral term and is not connected to Russia, but to Ruthenia – the historical area located at the intersection of territories of modern-day Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia.⁸

In Russia, Poland is not considered a country for emigration. It is perceived neither as mentally close nor highly developed.⁹ Russian migration to Poland has never been strictly economic; its goal was not to achieve a better material status, and Russians moved there mainly for personal reasons. Consequently, in the first wave of wartime migration, Poland was not considered a destination country but often simply the first place where it was possible to go. Due to a consistent anti-Polish message in Russian media, Russians regard Poland as a hostile country.¹⁰ For this reason, Alosha, one of our interlocutors, claimed: “There are no Russians in Poland who support the regime. If they support it, they should watch Russian television, and if they watch it, they are convinced that Poles will kill them at the border because, according to them, such Russophobia prevails in Poland.”¹¹

As a result, those who came to Poland are “people with unusual stories”: individuals who found themselves here due to an interest in Polish culture and language (like Daniel), due to relationships with Poles, or by coincidence (like Antonina or Artur). Pull factors of migration to Poland include the favorable level of living and education costs compared to Western European countries, and programs for skilled professionals, e.g. the Business Harbor program for IT specialists from Eastern Europe (Alosha and Mark). However, for everyone, a more important reason was the desire to leave Russia rather than come to Poland – push factors prevailed over pull factors: “[Russians] go to Poland not according to the principle of where I would like to emigrate, but where I can emigrate from Russia. Probably for this reason, you will not meet any Russian here who would support Putin or the war” (Alosha).

⁸ One of the most popular dumplings in Poland are called *ruskie*, which refers to the heritage of Ruthenia. At the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, some Polish speakers working in the food service industry, being unaware of the origin of that name, decided to withdraw the dumplings from the menu. The dumplings that stayed in the menus often had their name changed to “Ukrainian”, and sometimes even to “occupant”, which referred to Russia’s occupation of Ukraine. In a few months, when the word about the origins of *ruskie* dumplings spread, the dumplings were de-politicized and came back to menus under their usual name.

⁹ Among the terms used by Russians to describe Poland, “prosperity” and “trustworthy” are the least frequently mentioned (Kamenchuk & Gëzalian, 2021).

¹⁰ According to 37 percent of Russians, Poland is one of the most hostile countries (after the USA, Great Britain, Germany, and Ukraine); cf. *Massovye predstavleniia o druzhestvennykh i nedruzhestvennykh stranakh, otnoshenie k nekotorym stranam* (2024).

¹¹ All quotations from interviews were translated from Russian or (in rare cases) from Polish.

Mark, one of our interlocutors in Warsaw, feared the announcement of general mobilization and decided to leave as soon as possible: on February 26, 2022, he applied for a Polish visa through his employer. His girlfriend was to join him soon, but due to problems with obtaining a visa (at that time, European countries were successively closing their borders to Russian citizens) she managed to do so only after a few months (through a third country). "The departure was a manifesto of my convictions," Mark explained his hasty decision.

"If it weren't for Covid, we would have got organized and gone to Australia," Sofia and Igor stated. They had long planned to emigrate as they have disabled children, for whom there were no development opportunities in Russia (lack of facilities, lack of acceptance in public spaces). In their case, emigration was considered regardless of the political situation. The war made them choose the "easiest" and "fastest" direction to organize the move.

From the conversations, it appeared that most of the migrants had long considered the possibility of leaving Russia, feeling that the political atmosphere in the country was becoming denser, and that social and artistic initiatives were facing more restrictions. One of our interlocutors stated as follows: "I had been involved in various activist movements in Russia since 2011. And I realized that nothing good could be expected. Of course, I didn't know there would be a war. But it was known where Putin was leading the country. And I wanted to emigrate a long time ago" (Alosha). At the same time, he admitted: "The main grievance before the war was that [the authorities] steal, that there are no fair elections, that there are problems with the formation of civil society, that propaganda operates in the country. All this was bad, but bearable. It was possible to live with that." For many, the Russian invasion of Ukraine became the prevailing factor in the decision to emigrate.

Facing the stereotype of Polish Russophobia

The belief that Poland is a Russophobic country prevails in Russia (Kazakova, 2023; Kondrat'eva, 2022). The relatives or our interviewees warned them about expected manifestations of dislike and discrimination in Poland. Elizaveta's father "thinks that Poles hate Russians because that's what they say on [Russian] television". Artur recalled: "My mom didn't want me to leave, she said they would make me a slave here."

Our interlocutors who settled in Poland before February 24, 2022 emphasized that the fact that they were Russian had been met with positive interest, as something rare (Daniel, Antonina). They had no problems functioning in society. Sofia and Igor, who easily found their way in contacts with Poles, stated: "Poland and Russia are similar to each other. There is a kind of mirror symmetry: how you behave towards someone, so they behave towards you." Regarding the ease of establishing and maintaining contacts with the local population, our interviewees in Poland pointed to a similar mentality, a similar sense of humor, and a similar cultural code, while those in Germany noticed a tolerant approach and experience of living in a multicultural community. After February 24, 2022, Russians in Poland were expected to state their political position. In Germany, migrants from Russia did not encounter such questions.

Sofia and Igor feel very good in Poland. They had long dreamed of leaving Russia for the sake of their children, and now they clearly feel relieved. They rented an apartment, their children attend educational institutions and therapeutic classes, and they hired a nanny. Their quality of life has clearly improved, not so much economically, but on a psychological and medical level. In our conversation, we noticed an attempt to seek a new national identity based on Polish roots: "My grandmother was proud to be Polish," said Sofia, recalling a psychologist's statement in a Warsaw center about how "Polish blood cannot be diluted". However, this might have just indicated adaptation to the new place of residence, as the rest of the conversation showed that Poland was not Sofia and Igor's priority destination, and nor were national issues most important to them.

After February 24, 2022, many Russians experienced a shock, resulting in aversion to and fear of revealing their nationality. Sofia said: "People hear my accent and ask where I'm from. I tell them: 'From where you hear.' I don't even want to name [Russia]." She does not hide where she is from, but the word "Russia" does not cross her lips. Artur, who had been working in a large Polish city for many months, felt apprehensive about revealing his nationality in the first months of the war:

When asked where I'm from, there was always a pause because I didn't know whether to say it or not, how people would react. A few times, I said I was from Ukraine, from Odessa. But now I'm calmer because I know who I am, that I'm Russian, and that won't change.

He came to believe that what matters is not the origin but what kind of person one is. Alina also initially feared being identified as a Russian: "For the first month, I didn't want to go

out on the street, I was afraid to talk, [I feared] they would recognize me, my psyche worked that [I thought] probably everyone knew I was Russian." Antonina had similar fears:

The first month [after the outbreak of the war] I was afraid to speak Russian on the tram if someone called, an acquaintance or someone from my family. Then it started to pass because I started to see on the trams, as Ukrainians started arriving, that not all, but a large part of Ukrainians are also Russian-speaking, they also speak Russian.

Interestingly, Antonina, who has many contacts with Russian-speaking people from different countries, emphasized that she had not encountered discrimination even from Ukrainians. She only mentioned one case when a Belarusian had accused her of "choosing Putin". Yet, as she explained, "I left Russia [for another country than Poland] when I was 20 years old; I couldn't really choose [vote for] him, I didn't live in Russia."

"I was half a year old when Putin became president. And my whole life has been under Putin's rule," said Mark. Just after the outbreak of the war, he went to anti-war demonstrations in St. Petersburg. There were situations when he ran from officers and hid in gateways. When his friend was arrested, he got scared. He said he had felt powerless then, unable to do anything to influence the situation in the country or the fate of the war and its victims. He decided to leave not to be part of that system and at least not pay taxes to the war machine. In Poland, like all our interlocutors, he feels compelled to prove that he does not support the war and Russian authorities, which – in the context of his biography – is particularly painful for him.

Many of our interlocutors emphasized that although they did not experience discrimination at the level of social interactions, it was different at the institutional level. This was partly related to the implementation of sanction policies against Russian citizens. For example, Antonina filed another application for a residence card after living in Poland for six years and received a refusal in July 2022 on the grounds of posing a potential threat to the defense of the state. Daniel, in turn, had difficulties opening a bank account. As our interlocutors observe, since the outbreak of the war, migrants from Russia have been treated by Poles with surprise and distrust. A difficult aspect that makes it impossible to forget one's origin (which is stigmatized by war) is the feeling of needing to explain oneself, to clearly take a position on the ongoing war and Putin, even when the circumstances are not related to the topic. Daniel told us about an incident that took place in one of the offices:

I said that I have an extremely negative attitude towards the war, towards the Russian state, and so on, and he immediately changed his expression and called a colleague, "Listen, this is a man from Russia, but he is on our side." And I'm sitting right next to him thinking that they are talking as if I wasn't there. It surprised him so much that he started telling his coworkers about it while preparing my documents.

Elizaveta does not hide that she is Russian because she wants to "break the stereotype". She wants to show by her example that Russians – like all other people – can be different:

I say straight that I am from Russia, although friends suggested that it would be better to say, for example, from Belarus [...]. It's easier to say you're from Belarus than to wonder if they spit in your [coffee] cup. [...] and so I will say that I am Russian because it is nonsense [to deny it]. [...] I do not break the law, I have never broken it, I treat everyone with respect and I am Russian. [I tell this to Poles] to break their stereotypical thinking that all Russians are bad.

Trying to change the image of Russians abroad has become a kind of mission and individual survival strategy for many migrants in the situation of double alienation: from the Russian state and from the host state.

Reactions to the outbreak of open war

The wartime Russian migration is, in a sense, forced migration. In the case of both the first and the second wave, we are dealing with individuals who made the decision to leave due to various kinds of threat they would face if they stayed in Russia. Our interlocutors had to choose – more or less consciously – certain survival strategies once abroad, concerning not only their legal and economic status but also psychological comfort about staying in a new environment. The most important ways to regain a sense of agency in this complex situation include political activism as well as volunteering and other charitable activities.

All our interlocutors remember the day the open war broke out: where they were and what they were doing. For most, the events of February 24, 2022 were a complete surprise. Their reaction was shock. It was usually followed by disagreement, in many cases expressed by participating in public protests, and then a feeling of helplessness and fear. For those who were still in Russia at the time, the next stage was the decision to leave. Many people struggled with depressive states for a long time after the beginning of Russian invasion.

"We are stressed and exhausted. We agreed to this conversation because we simply wanted to talk to someone, to get out of the house," Mark and Polia told us. Their hurried departure from Russia turned out to be more complicated than they could have imagined, and in Poland they found themselves in a difficult situation. The most stressful issue for them was their legal residency status (at the time of the conversation, both were waiting for a decision from the Office for Foreigners regarding a temporary residence permit). Unlike Mark, Polia could not study or work as she did not speak Polish. They had no friends in Poland, and they missed their relatives in Russia – all this also affected their emotional state. They were both scared of what they had undertaken. Although they did not encounter discrimination upon arrival, they felt that, as Russians, they were unwelcome in Poland, and that they should conceal their origin at all costs. "In fact, we have not faced any discrimination, but sometimes we are afraid to go out and talk to each other in Russian because someone might hear." Due to their fears, they isolated themselves from other people. When they went to a protest of Russians in front of the Russian embassy, they were surprised that they were safe from the police: "The feeling that a policeman protects you, that he is not your enemy, is something unusual."

Artur has been living in Poland for several years, but since the military conflict broke out, he has not felt as confident here as before – like most of our interlocutors, he is afraid that his residence permit might not be extended because he was born in a wrong place. It is hard for him to feel "at home" in Poland as he could lose this home at any moment. At the same time, he considers himself well integrated, and he is satisfied with his professional and material situation. He emphasized that he feels more connected to his hometown than to Russia as a whole. Even before the open armed conflict, he took a clear stance, and everyone who had closer contact with him knew his political views – he was against the Russian government. After the war broke out, he felt numb for several weeks, then shook it off and began to volunteer to help Ukraine. He also participated in the activities of Memorial,¹² such as writing letters to political prisoners. Then, he started a local group of Russians opposing the war, which is both a group of active volunteers and one that provides a certain mutual moral support.

¹² Memorial is an international human rights organization founded in Russia during the fall of the Soviet Union to study and examine the human rights violations and other crimes committed under Stalin's regime. Subsequently, it expanded the scope of its research to cover the entire Soviet period. The organization has received numerous awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

One of the reasons why I wanted to get involved [in activism] was people who arrived after the war broke out and were afraid to speak Russian. They were afraid to leave their homes here in Poland because they were afraid of negative reactions. [...] I wanted to create something to show that we are not bad, that we are good.

Elizaveta was a political activist and collaborator of an opposition city councilor for several years. She participated in protests and faced administrative penalties. She arrived in Poland on a humanitarian visa five months after the war broke out.¹³ Her relatives do not share her political views, but she still worries about them, especially because some of them are of conscription age. She does not build her identity on nationality, feels like a cosmopolitan, but speaks of herself as a Russian to break the stereotypes that exist in Poland. At the same time, she does not feel like a patriot of her country, but a “patriot of her hometown”. In the interview, she said that she wanted to return to her beloved city, but only when the political situation changes.

The concept of “permanent residence” in Russian is *PMZh* (*postoiannoe mesto zhitel'stva*). Many émigrés emphasize that they left for *PPZh* (*poka Putin zhiv*), meaning “for as long as Putin is alive”, indicating the temporary and oppressive nature of the situation they found themselves in. A similar meaning is conveyed by the term *relokanty* (“relocators”), highlighting the temporary change of place of residence and lack of attachment to new conditions. For many of them, just like for Elizaveta, a change in Russia’s political regime is a condition for their return.

Alina stated as follows: “The only thing that helped me emotionally survive all this is that I was a volunteer in Russia, I was a volunteer in Germany, and from the first day, I started volunteering here.” Helping other people in need allows one to forget about one’s problems and gain perspective on them. At the same time, it enables one to feel active and effective. For some, volunteering is also a way of “atoning for guilt”.

Another form of engagement is political protest. Alosha regularly attends protests in front of the Russian embassy in Warsaw. He began doing so after reading a call by the leading Russian opposition figure Aleksei Navalny on Twitter (today: X), in which he urged Russians in exile to organize protests in the main squares of the cities they lived in:

I hadn't been in Warsaw for long and I didn't know which square is considered the main one here. Whether it's the square in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, Castle

¹³ Humanitarian visa is one of the tools that enable states to grant assistance to those in need of legal and safe access to international protection.

Square, or Constitution Square – I didn't know. So, I decided to go to the embassy the same evening I saw that tweet.

Many Russian émigrés do not go to demonstrations because, as they claim, they no longer believe in their effectiveness: they consider them purely “symbolic”. What is more, they view them as actions that carry enormous risk. Even outside Russia, some protesters wear masks, fearing that revealing their faces will lead to repercussions for them or their relatives who still live in the country. Alosha wondered about the reasons for this political apathy among his compatriots:

Maybe Putin's Russia has instilled it in them; because in Putin's Russia it's really hard to influence politics through protests, so they don't go. I go [to protests]. I go for myself because it's important for me to express opposition, to remind myself that I don't accept everything, that I am against all this. [...] I do it for myself, to keep reminding myself that this is unacceptable to me.

Some decide to join organizations or associations of like-minded people (e.g. the associations called Free Russia and Russians Against the War, which are active in Poland). Meanwhile, Alosha's wife is among those who do not engage in protests. She chose to engage through financial support of aid foundations, believing that this way she has a more real impact on reality.

Immediately after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Polish public space was filled with talk of the “collective guilt” of all Russians. The media narrative and everyday conversations were dominated by a black-and-white image based on national stereotypes, dividing people into opposing camps. Russians were ascribed certain “eternal” national characteristics, a certain national mentality, which was supposed to explain the aggression against a neighboring state. When asked about the feeling of participation in this imposed collective guilt, most of the interviewees did not accept it, which does not mean they did not feel a responsibility, understood more as action shaping the present and future, rather than atonement for the past.

Petr explained that the sense of “collective responsibility” is more rational than the sense of “collective guilt”, because guilt drowns one, drags one down, and deprives one of motivation to act. In this sense, contemplating one's responsibility and rejecting supposed personal guilt is a strategic action that enables one to build a new identity. Petr feels a sense of responsibility; he always has. He acted as an urban activist and educator for years; he went

to the polls and never supported Putin. The only thing he could reproach himself for is that he did not participate in protests – he was afraid that the youth organization he worked for at the time could suffer because of his involvement in demonstrations. Today, both in his private and professional life, he supports anti-war and aid organizations.

Alosha, in turn, when asked about a sense of guilt, answered with a rhetorical question: “What have I done wrong?” He said that he was 23 years old when he began to actively participate in Russia’s political life. “I started going to demonstrations in 2011, and got involved in electoral activism. I was an observer at elections. Then I became a member of a district election commission, ensuring there was no falsification of results in my district.” And he did it effectively because, as he claimed, opposition politicians won in his district. Mark, who supported Aleksei Navalny’s headquarters and went out to protest in the streets of St. Petersburg after the outbreak of the war, admitted: “I myself could have done more. But collective guilt means that every Russian is guilty, and that’s not the case. I can’t blame everyone I meet.” Alina rejected this idea: “I just don’t feel [collective guilt] because I always went to demonstrations, I volunteer, I help Ukrainians, we evacuate people from occupied territories.”

According to Daniel, the guilty ones are those who give orders or commit crimes. Considering the responsibility that every Russian bears, he associates it with difficulties and restrictions now affecting everyone with a Russian passport due to sanctions. The fact that it will now be harder for him to get another residence permit in Poland and that his parents cannot enter Poland to see him are minor difficulties that cannot be compared with what Ukrainians are going through, but it is part of the responsibility all Russians bear.

When talking about guilt, Antonina said: “I feel guilty that my country, where I was born, does such things, that people just, I don’t know, it doesn’t compute in my head, how can one... and why these little children, these families, these mothers who had to leave their husbands, brothers, fathers to save their lives...” Her years of living as an émigré in different parts of the world have led to a relativistic approach to historical and systemic issues. Antonina sees that the same history is taught differently in different countries, and “the homeland and the government are two separate things that we must distinguish”, which mirrors Timofeeva’s separation between homeland and the concept of power (Timofeeva, 2020, p. 38).

Our interlocutors clearly expressed fatigue from having to constantly explain and position themselves. In every situation where one is identified as a Russian, they need to define/confirm their oppositional and anti-war stance. Russian migrants in Poland feel that this is doubly unfair:

Isn't it obvious that if you're now in Poland, which currently doesn't let Russians in at all, you have a negative attitude towards the war? But a very common question when you meet someone and they find out you're from Russia is: "What do you think about the war, what do you think about Putin?" (Elizaveta)

The constant need to break away from the black-and-white image and narrative of the collective guilt of the entire Russian nation is destructive to the psyche of those fleeing the war and the regime. Although in many ways they feel victims of this regime, they are publicly equated with its sympathizers. As Elizaveta emotionally put it:

This imposition of guilt never ends, it really leads to some kind of schizophrenia, depression [...]; you start asking yourself questions, am I a good Russian? A lot of different questions. I blame [the host] society for [portraying] the Russians [...] who do not support the war, for trying to present them as the same murderers, as those who support it, and it's a constant imposition that you're a murderer, [...] it just destroys everything in you. I too am afraid of war, I am also against it, I support Ukrainians, donate whenever I can, I was detained [by the police in Russia] several times, I have a lot of fines [for participating in protests in Russia], so what else should I do to gain favor and not be considered a bad Russian?

Alina's statement echoed that of Elizaveta's:

It was quite hard for me to realize that in one moment [in the general perception] you changed from a human into a beast. It was quite hard, now having to prove that you're a good person. I don't identify with the expression "good Russian", because I simply don't consider myself Russian. But I have to prove – because of my passport – that I'm a good person and I have to prove it to everyone.

Re-defining Russian identity

Many young, educated, and mobile people see the war started by Vladimir Putin as an anachronistic conflict, set in terms that, in the twenty-first century in Europe, are becoming a thing of the past. In the case of new Russian emigration, we are dealing with entirely new strategies of identity formation in the host country, according to which nationality turns out to be secondary. It is not about denying Russian identity, but rather about not treating it as the most important element of identity.

Some interviewees stressed that the war forced a linguistic turn. In the anti-war activist community, there is emphasis on acknowledging ethnic and national minorities in Russia, which is broadly related to the aspiration to break away from colonialism and imperialism – at least on a mental level. A high level of tolerance and commitment to actions for all minorities and discriminated groups was reflected in the language used by our interlocutors, both in Poland and Germany. Their vocabulary was more politically correct and egalitarian, and had more feminine forms than is the case in common Russian in Russia. We also encountered attempts at decolonization through language when telling time: “at 10:00 Kyiv (and Moscow) time”. Our observations confirm the findings of the OutRush project: “The feminist agenda, tolerance for LGBT+, openness to ethnic and racial diversity, and a decolonial perspective are important for many in the new wave of emigration” (Kostenko et al., 2023).

Among our interlocutors, the definition of homeland is changing: homeland is increasingly seen as a region (e.g. Siberia) or one’s hometown, rather than the state as a whole and its authorities, which are primarily viewed as a source of oppression. As Timofeeva observes, “in Russian culture, the phrase ‘teach [someone] to love the homeland’ is treated as a threat. The first associations are violence, persecution, torture in penal colonies and prisons” (Timofeeva, 2020, p. 37). She adds that patriotic education intensifies when war is coming, as the ideological narrative stitches the territory and its inhabitants into one whole. This regime project failed for our interviewees, who clearly criticized not only blind love for the homeland (“I won’t give my life for the homeland because I only have one” – Alosha) but also the very fact of its existence: “The homeland is not Russia, I haven’t been everywhere in it; for me, the homeland is my city where I walked” (Artur).

The homeland our interlocutors miss is a space they know from personal experience, their family and friends who stayed “there”, the former lifestyle that will not return because “that Russia” no longer exists. This is perhaps the biggest similarity of the new war emigration to the “White” emigration after the 1917 revolution: their homeland no longer exists, replaced by another socio-political entity. Hence references to a local homeland or small communities, which are more connected with direct experience and less dependent on changes beyond their participants’ control: “The homeland is not some big deal, the homeland is your family, friends. That is the homeland,” Mark said. “Small homeland” gains primacy over the “big” one in the experience of the migrants we spoke with. In such smaller communities, it is easier to feel a sense of belonging and agency: “Each of us will

always be a member of some group, the smallest of which is the family. [...] how can a person from Murmansk, who doesn't know me and I don't know him, affect me?" Sofia wondered. She seeks a sense of community based on convergent views, positions, and actions, not on more general categories such as nationality or citizenship.

Alosha wondered:

What is homeland for you, for Poles? It's your home, it's the place you can always return to if you leave; you can always return, you have a state you know how to communicate with [...]. The place where you grew up, which you love. And I don't have it. I wouldn't want to be in Russia now. [...] I have no desire to identify with Russia. I don't deny that I'm Russian, I'm a citizen of Russia, I have a [Russian] passport. But even I feel it's unpleasant to talk about it.

Antonina admitted that she finds it hard to say she is Russian: "But I'm from Russia; this terrible tragedy [the war] happened, but I can't erase myself from it, and for the rest of my life I will be from Russia." Some of our interviewees reject nationality as something anachronistic or discredited by politics and war, while others feel stripped of it, deprived – in both cases, there is a reevaluation of national issues.

The search for a new identity connected with Russianness, which cannot be completely abstracted for some, involves the recreation of Russian symbols, most notably seen in the example of the "new Russian flag" (a similar phenomenon occurs among opposition-minded Belarusians). According to anti-war Russians, the official Russian flag has been discredited: it is flown by armed units fighting at the front and exploited in the state's imperial policy. The need for a new flag emerged spontaneously among political activists in the early days of the war. A white-blue-white variant spread. The red color on the official Russian flag was associated with blood; its absence on the opposition flag refers to concepts like peace, purity, truth, or justice, corresponding to white and blue colors.¹⁴ Alosha explained this as follows:

It's the flag of the Russian anti-war resistance movement. It appeared right after the war started. [...] There's no historical context; there have been attempts to invent a story that it was the flag of the Novgorod Republic, but in reality, it's a myth. It's just a flag because we understand that coming out under the traditional Russian flag, the state flag, is completely inappropriate; it will be misunderstood, and we don't want to hold

¹⁴ See for example: *U antivoennogo dvizheniia poiavilsia novyi simvol protesta – belo-sine-belyi flag* (2022).

it. But at the same time, we need some symbol to unite us, to show our community. And this is the flag now used by Russians around the world, mainly émigrés, because in Russia it was declared a “prohibited symbol”.

The realization that there is no possibility of keeping the previous symbols and traditions makes the interviewees redefine the term homeland. They are aware that even a physical return to their hometown will be a journey to a different place because it has changed since the war began – nothing will be exactly as it was. This seems to correspond to Timofeeva’s view. Referring to her own personal experiences, she notes that every place where she grew up, lived, learned, or worked has left a mark on her and co-created her, but at the same time it is she who creates it because memory is fallible, and memories often interweave reality with dreams (Timofeeva, 2020, pp. 55–56). Our identity created by a specific time – a stage in a person’s life and a stage in the life of a given place – is also influenced by geopolitics. It “fragments” people’s identities, dividing lives into “before” and “after”. Homeland does not belong to national or state categories but, according to Timofeeva, is an intimate relationship between a person and a place existing in a specific time. Therefore, one can choose their homeland and can have many.

Conclusions

Our research focused on ethnic (at least in part) Russian migrants who arrived in Poland and Germany shortly before or just after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It explored the identity challenges stemming from their connection to the aggressor state – formal (through citizenship), emotional (through personal sentiments or close relatives living in Russia), and social (through the perceptions and expectations of host country populations).

We observed that, in the initial moment of shock and terror following the outbreak of open conflict, many migrants coped by engaging in social and political activism. Russian migrants often participated in humanitarian efforts supporting Ukrainian refugees and took a clear stance in opposition to the Kremlin’s policies. Some of these actions were spontaneous and reflexive, while others were shaped by explicit or implicit social expectations to adopt a political position.

For ethnic Russians, association with the aggressor country often led to a desire to dilute or reframe the foundations of their individual identity. This process included seeking non-Russian roots in their family histories or redefining the notion of homeland as something detached from the state and political authority, and focused instead on a local region, town, or neighborhood, shaped by its culture and community rather than national politics. This emerging “migrant Russianness” includes a spectrum ranging from cosmopolitan and supranational identities to local and urban/regional affiliations. The new wave of Russian migration largely consists of young, mobile people who identify with a broader, global community. Leaving Russia – whether a hasty escape or a planned decision – is not necessarily experienced by them as a traumatic break from one’s roots, which has traditionally been considered a key criterion for diaspora identity (Derlicki, 2013). Although, as the OutRush project indicates, the economic situation of Russian migrants has worsened in most cases, their well-being has improved (e.g. increased sense of agency). They have “a high level of trust, they are ready to switch to the agenda of the host country, to participate in charitable activities and social initiatives” (Kostenko et al., 2023). This group is also characterized by strong horizontal ties, developed and sustained through online social networks. We observed a shift in how national identity is approached, including the adoption of alternative national symbols and efforts to decolonize the Russian language – acts that may be interpreted as forms of resistance and attempts to reshape reality.

Another dimension of identity transformation involves challenging the stereotypical image of a Russian man or woman, striving to present Russianness from a different perspective, and liberating themselves from imposed collective guilt. For many of our interlocutors, their story of political or social activism in Russia and refusal to support the current regime serves as grounds to reject the responsibility for the actions of the Russian state. Nonetheless, the question of moral responsibility is taken seriously and addressed through engagement in humanitarian work or acceptance of the hardships and restrictions associated with holding a Russian passport.

Researching people in migration situations, i.e. belonging to a sensitive category, requires special delicacy, especially when it is a group of citizens from an aggressor state. On one hand, it is difficult to reach people with views which are not accepted in public space (i.e. in the case of Poland, those supporting the war and the current regime); on the other hand, there is a temptation to show Russian migrants in the best possible light in order to break the one-sided narrative about Russians. We tried to mitigate the risk arising from

excessive sympathy with the subjects by clearly declaring an engaged stance while striving to maintain objectivity and transparency.

Ethical risk is inherent in many fields of study, not only those related to migration and nationality – for example, in research on activists and emancipatory movements. Considering the risk of involvement in the situation of the subjects and asymmetrical relations, the response may be to adopt an empathetic attitude, which assumes compassion and openness to the interlocutor, and, at the stage of interpreting the material, focus on “giving voice to” rather than “speaking on behalf of” the subjects. In this article, we aimed to present many direct statements from our interlocutors. They indicate their individual experiences of migration and identity dilemmas related to staying in a country hostile to their state of origin. They also outline issues representative of most of the latest Russian emigration, which is still seeking its place in a world marked by a prolonged painful conflict. We hope that this perspective can shed some light on the subject of Russian war-related migration and inspire further research.

Interviews

- 1_22 Alosha, Warsaw, August 22, 2022
- 2_22 Igor and Sofia, Warsaw, August 24, 2022
- 3_22 Mark and Polia, Warsaw, August 26, 2022
- 4_22 Olga, Warsaw, September 14, 2022
- 5_22 Aleksandr, Tri-City, December 15, 2022
- 6_22 Artur, Tri-City, December 15, 2022
- 7_22 Elizaveta, Tri-City, December 16, 2022
- 8_22 Svetlana, Tri-City, December 16, 2022
- 9_22 Antonina, Tri-City, December 16, 2022
- 10_22 Alina, Aleksei, Sergei, Tri-City, December 17, 2022
- 11_23 Petr, Berlin, February 10, 2023
- 12_23 Egor, Berlin, February 10, 2023
- 13_23 Nastia, Berlin, February 10, 2023
- 14_23 Dina, Berlin, February 10, 2023
- 15_23 Lila, Berlin, February 11, 2023
- 16_23 Daniel, Warsaw, February 25, 2023

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U antivoennogo dvizheniia poiavilsia novyi simvol protesta – belo-sine-belyi flag: "Meduza" rasskazyvaet, kto i zachem ego pridumal. (2022, March 14). Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/14/u-antivoennogo-dvizheniya-poyavilsya-novyy-simvol-protesta-belo-sine-belyi-flag-meduza-rasskazyvaet-kto-i-zachem-ego-pridumal>

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Between the Individual and the Collective: Identity Dilemmas of Russian Migrants after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Sample Research in Poland and Germany

This article considers the issue of identity dilemmas of Russian migrants in Poland and Germany after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It is based on face-to-face interviews conducted within the first twelve months following the outbreak of open war, a period when our interlocutors faced dilemmas of various kinds, including questions of self-perception. The chosen timing of the study allowed, on the one hand, to register the freshness of our interviewees' impressions and, on the other hand, to have them share some reflections that came after the initial period of surprise and shock. The experiences of these migrants span between what is unique and individual and what is common and representative for the entire Russian emigration of that time. The article attempts to capture their changing approach to their own "Russianness". Stigmatized by the aggressive policy of their country of origin, they develop individual survival strategies, such as political engagement or volunteering, and try to create an alternative image of a Russian man/woman, without reference to state/national categories. Our small pool of interviews does not aim to provide a representative portrait of all Russian migrants in Poland and Germany: it is focused on the micro-world of a migrant in the hope that this perspective can shed additional light on the subject and inspire further research.

Keywords:

war; migration; Russia; nationality; homeland; self-perception; cultural anthropology

Między jednostkowym a zbiorowym: dylematy tożsamościowe rosyjskich migrantów po agresji Rosji na Ukrainę. Badania pilotażowe w Polsce i Niemczech

Niniejszy tekst podejmuje problematykę dylematów tożsamościowych rosyjskich migrantów w Polsce i Niemczech po ataku Rosji na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 roku. Opiera się na wywiadach przeprowadzonych w ciągu pierwszych dwunastu miesięcy od rozpoczęcia otwartego konfliktu zbrojnego, które dla naszych respondentów były wypełnione dylematami różnego rodzaju, w tym związanymi z samoidentyfikacją. Wybrany czas badania pozwolił z jednej strony zarejestrować świeżość wrażeń naszych rozmówców, z drugiej – usłyszeć już ich refleksje, które pojawiły się po początkowym okresie zaskoczenia i szoku. Doświadczenia migrantów, z którymi rozmawialiśmy, rozciągają się między tym, co unikalne i indywidualne, a tym, co wspólne i reprezentatywne dla całej rosyjskiej emigracji okółowojennego okresu. Tekst próbuje uchwycić ich zmieniające się podejście do własnej „rosyjskości”. Napiętnowani

agresywną polityką kraju pochodzenia, rozwijają indywidualne strategie przetrwania, takie jak polityczny aktywizm czy wolontariat, oraz próbują stworzyć alternatywny wizerunek Rosjanina/Rosjanki, nieodwołujący się do kategorii państwowo-narodowych. Przeprowadzona przez nas, stosunkowo niewielka pula wywiadów nie ma ambicji dostarczenia reprezentatywnego portretu wszystkich rosyjskich migrantów w Polsce i Niemczech. Mamy jednak nadzieję, że przedstawiona perspektywa, koncentrująca się na mikroświecie migranta, może rzucić dodatkowe światło i zainspirować dalsze badania na ten temat.

Słowa kluczowe:

wojna; migracja; Rosja; narodowość; ojczyzna; samoidentyfikacja; antropologia kulturowa

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