

Migration from Russia 2022-2023: Patterns, Adaptation, Relations

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1. Introduction

Georgia and Armenia remained as countries of origins over the course of several decades as hundreds of thousand left post Soviet republics due to armed conflicts, natural disasters, and economic crises. The majority of these migrants have experienced seasonal labour migration, mostly in Russia.²

Mass exodus of Russians following the commencement of the full-fledged war in Ukraine sent shockwaves among not only host communities but for Russian migrants as well. Even those who were not 'beyond politics' in Russia, did not anticipate the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Interviews with Russian migrants recorded in the spring 2022 are dominated by anger, fear, depression, and bewilderment. The majority of migrants reside in Tbilisi and Batumi. Over the past few years Georgia has attracted droves of political migrants from Russia and Belarus.³ Many researchers have tried to ascertain a scale of this migration wave. However, to accurately calculate number of migrants arriving in certain interval is an extremely arduous task: during the first year of migration, majority of migrants would cross to Armenia and return again while many left for Russia several times and returned back. There have been numerous individual

¹ The author is a member of Exodus-22, an independent group of social researchers whose data, findings and citations are used in the present paper. Exodus-22 brings together Russian nationals who left the country in the late winter 2022 and early spring of 2023. Respondents of the research were Russian nationals who arrived in Georgia and Armenia after 24 February 2022. Researchers used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods: two online surveys were administered in March and May 2022 and from November 2022 to January 2023. In addition, more than 50 in-depth interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023. <https://exodus22team.wordpress.com/>

² Mataradze, Teona, and Florian Mühlfried. "Leaving and Being left Behind: labor Migration in Georgia." *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 4(2009):2-4. Badurashvili, Irina. *Circular migration in Georgia* (2012).

³ We use the term 'migrants' in order to avoid overburdening the status of the respondents and concentrating on just one type of migration. In response to direct questions, Russian respondents use 'migrants', 'expats', 'relocants'. However, in general, particularly in 2022, they preferred to not use any term in reference to themselves. „generally, to be honest, I am more inclined to think that it feels like sticking a label to someone. I am a person who... does not want to live in the county which has become what it is now. I am someone who has left, someone who is against' (male,26) This stems from the refusal to accept one's status and is rooted in uncertainties when it comes to plans. The belief that they have left Russia forever or for a long time is directly linked to the readiness to call themselves 'migrant'/'immigrant'. The terms 'relocants' and 'expats' point out to one's discretion while changing a place of residence, its temporary and fluid nature, as well as certain privileges that the person enjoys (the freedom to choose a place of residence at one's free will rather than being compelled to do so by coercion or under duress). Initially, the word 'relocation' had been used in its narrow meaning, to denote relocation of business or moving around with an employer. However, the word soon acquired a broader meaning and effectively moved closer to 'migration'. Also, one can come across such mocking terms as «уезжанты» (those who left), «понаехи» (aliens) etc in chats and everyday communication between Russian nationals. Such an irony is an instrument to cope with migration stress as well as negative attitudes towards one's own self.

trajectories including seeking repatriation through respective procedures in Israel and obtaining EU or USA visas. A high degree of mobility also accounts for difficulties in not only estimating the number of those migrants who reside in Georgia on a permanent basis, but also in ascertaining migration flow between Georgia and other countries. Statistical methods are rendered ineffective by such a high rate of mobility as well as by impossibility to draw a line between tourist and migration flows.

According to the information provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, as of 3 October 2022, there were up to 112 thousand citizens of Russia staying in Georgia.⁴ This is a huge number for a host country with the population of just 3.7 million. According to other sources, up to 60.000 Russians arrived and stayed in Georgia.⁵ Most researchers agree that the Russian migration in Georgia reached its peak in late 2022 and early 2023 with Russian emigres totalling up to 100.000 individuals.⁶ The peak was then followed by outflow. It seems that tens of thousands of Russians left Georgia. This is something that is felt by many migrants. Even though some groups of Russians arrive in Georgia from Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and other countries, some have been leaving for Russia, Europe, the USA, South-East Asia, or Israel.⁷ The immigration of Russians from Georgia is likely to continue for some time, however, considerable part will remain in Georgia, nevertheless.

1.1 Migration waves of 2022

Following the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, two large waves of migrants left Russia, the first, right after the launch of the aggression and the second in September 2022 immediately after the Russian authorities had announced 'partial mobilization' in the country. Even though a difference in the quality between these two waves (referred as February and September waves actively covered by media outlets) have become a subject of many jokes,⁸ findings of the research suggest that these two waves of migration are the parts of the single process which, if varying in intensity, has never ceased since the launch of the full-scale aggression and in part, follows the pre-war patterns: young and middle ages, higher education level, liberal views,

⁴ Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia 03.10.2022

<https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/MpQuestionContent/19959>

⁵ «800 тысяч россиян могли покинуть страну в 2022 году» Если быть точным, 27.02.2023 *Ирина Ширманова* <https://tochno.st/materials/rossiyan-mogli-pokinut-stranu-v-2022-godu>

⁶ «Russian émigrés in Georgia» CRRC-Georgia, 05.09.2023 *Givi Sigaladze*

https://crrc.ge/uploads/tiny_mce/documents/NED/NED%20Russians%20report%20v3_ENG.pdf

⁷ «After A Frosty Reception, Tbilisi's Wartime Russians Are Beginning To Leave» Radio Free Europe, 21.01.2024 *Joshua Kucera* <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-russians-fleeing-war-leaving-/32784835.html#>

⁸ 'Ante-bellum (Довойнята), Februarians (февралыята), Septembrians (сентябрыята) are the terms used to differentiate a new wave of migration in Georgia from those who arrived in the country before the announcement of mobilization. Спектр. Пресс 17.10.2022 *Максим Дементьев* <https://spektr.press/dovojnyata-fevralyata-sentyabryata-chno-otlichaet-novuyu-volnu-russkih-immigrantov-v-gruzii-ot-teh-kto-uehal-eschy-do-vvedeniya-mobilizacii/>

desire to live in democracies, discontent towards the Russian authorities and significant political factor.^{9,10}

The overwhelming majority of the migrants are from the two largest Russian cities of Moscow (48% in the fall, 49% in the spring) and St. Petersburg (24% in the fall and 26% in the spring). An average age of the migrants in both waves is 32 with a large share of IT specialists (45% in the spring and 40% in the fall) and other professions (teachers, designers, journalists, scientists etc).

The majority of migrants had some savings: 31.6% of the spring migrants and 42.2% of those who arrived in the fall believed that their saving would suffice for six months. Gender distribution has been found to be the only significant difference: if, in the spring of 2022 there was an equal share of men and women, in the fall, men accounted for two third of the migrants driven, most likely, by the fear of mobilization and determination to escape from the participation in the war. Among respondents also were women specialized in healthcare who also feared mobilization and the closure of borders for potential conscripts.

There has been some difference in planning patterns: more respondents from the fall flow (26%) said their departure was 'planned' or 'more planned' while only 13.9% of the spring flow appeared to have planned for moving to another country. Based on what respondents had to say during their interviews, it can be assumed that the announcement of partial mobilization sped things up for those who had been planning to leave following the commencement of the war or were still considering this option.

In order to cross-check this observation, the respondents of the fall round were also asked whether, before October 21, they would consider the idea that they would soon have to leave

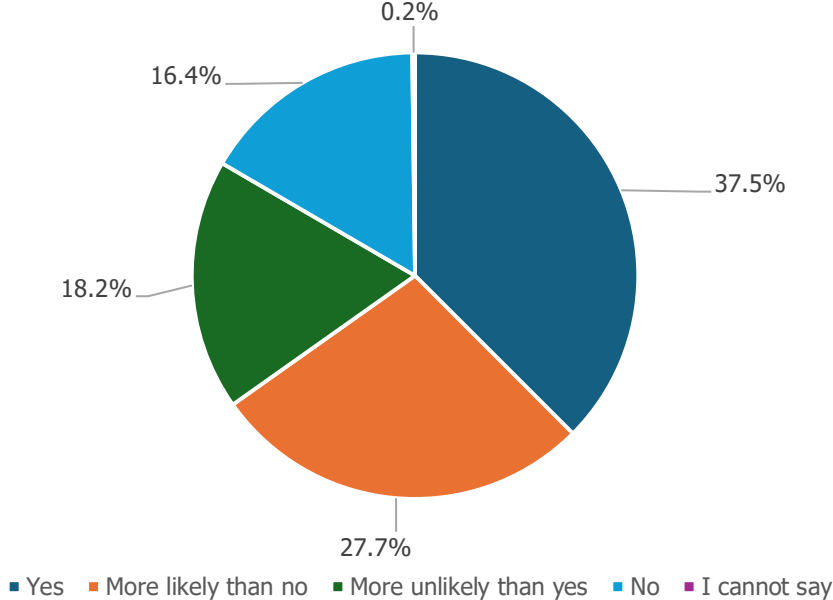
⁹ A paper titled «The Putin Exodus: The new Russian braindrain» 21.02.2019

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-putin-exodus-the-new-russian-brain-drain-3/>, which maintains its high relevance, caused the biggest outcry. The 2012 presidential elections and the Bolotnaya Protests ensued after the aforementioned elections are considered a watershed in Moscow and other regions of Russia. The Bolotnaya rallies marked the biggest protest in the modern history of Russia. The quelling of the protest with blunt police force and cruelty, reelection of Vladimir Putin for the third term, and the refusal to cede to claims about falsification of elections had broken all hopes about Russia's democratic future. Following the dire developments, the political factor of migration overpowered the economic factor. Migration from Russia before and after, had been related to a pursuit of improved life conditions, better prospects for young people, businesses and specialists in light of such prospects withering in Russia. Drastic increase in negative sentiments and attitudes had led to a slight acceleration of migration (throughout the country) which continued along with the annexation of Crimea and further consolidation of autocratisation. It is difficult to draw a line between political and economic drivers of migration at this point of time because of concurrent political (authorities stepping over the red line) and economic changes (economic backsliding due to the sanctions imposed against Russia) following these developments. Political drivers are on the rise again. Emigrants of the 2010s are strikingly different from those of the previous years (especially of the 1990s) whose representatives do not often have opinion about the Russian politics, support Putin or are under the influence of the Russian propaganda.

¹⁰ Земцов Павел Андреевич, Бедрина Елена Борисовна. Пятая волна эмиграции из России как фактор адаптации. Миграционные процессы и межкультурные коммуникации в условиях глобальных вызовов (2022) [Zemtsov Pavel, Bedrina Yelena, *The Fifth Wave of Migration from Russia as a Factor of Adaptation. Migration Processes and Intercultural Communication in the Face of Global Challenges*). Available in Russian at: https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/108687/1/978-5-91256-542-7_1_039.pdf

the country. The answers suggests that more than two third of the respondents had been considering leaving the country corroborating our preliminary finding.

Before 21 October, did you think that you would leave the country? (the fall wave)



1.2 Reasons for leaving Russia

Respondents of interviews mention diverse reasons for fleeing Russia including fear of political persecution, censorship, psychologically charged environment, threat of mobilization, absence of future prospects – wording may vary across the questionnaires. These wordings may be ascribed to those assessments of Russia’s domestic situation which are mostly based on political preferences and values. The most popular response is the exclusively rational-economic one: ‘inability to work in the country for technological reasons.’ Interestingly, this option was preferred by those staff of IT companies who had left with the help of their employers or on the latter’s demand – the so called ‘relocants’. However, this group constitutes just a small share of migrants or even IT specialists.

In the spring 2022 survey, majority of respondents said ‘severe psychological condition’ was the reason for which they decided to leave the country while ‘not wanting to live in the country which wages a war’ dominated responses in the fall 2022 round. Almost all migrants of the ‘spring wave’ appeared to have experienced shock and depression since their country had stepped across the line which was once perceived as unfathomable. Many respondents reported being petrified with the number of compatriots supporting the launch of military actions while public protest had been miniscule.

‘This was a complete shock and the only thing that could save me was to get far away from this nightmare as people had turned into horrible TV zombies. I simply would not survive in society so sick with fascism. I left just like many did. There had been no talks about mobilisation back then. However, even though it was unbearable to stay in such society, I still had a privilege to

just buy a ticket without losing my job, or family or anything. There was not much holding me back there.’ (male,50)

‘[I realised] that should I stay in Russia I would have lost my mind... all this dirt tries to get hold of you, it crawls towards you and attacks you from all possible holes. It makes your eyes shut, fills up your mouth and nose and chokes you. You cannot see and hear. It kills you. I was not ready for that. Moreover, at some point I realised that I would meet people, people who I knew in my circle, as well as strangers who think that everything is ok.’ (Female, 27)

In the spring 2022, a large group of people decided to emigrate in the face of extreme despair and overwhelm with panic. In the fall 2022, after the announcement of mobilization, they were joined by those who remained in Russia for various reasons including a hope that the war would end in a short period of time, volunteering, taking care of elderly relatives, lack of knowledge of foreign language, lack of savings, absence of international passports or other travel documents etc. Some of those who arrived in the country in the fall had already been to Georgia but chose to return home in order to better prepare for a long-term relocation.

1.3 Current trends in migration

By the end of 2023, flow of migrants from Russia to Georgia significantly diminished. In addition, many left Georgia for those countries which they chose for long-term migration. From the very onset, a considerable number of respondents of both surveys and rounds of interviews, had considered Georgia as transit before reaching final destination. However, many would decide whether to stay or leave Georgia based on certain experience of living in the country. There is a number of factors which had had certain influence on such decision. For some, relocation to another country is associated with improved economic opportunities and prospects for long-term legalisation, or the obtaining of a third-country citizenship. Others are concerned with their fragile legal status and political instability in Georgia.

Thanks to a series of neoliberal reforms Russian nationals can stay in Georgia for almost indefinite period of time, do a visa run once a year, register business, and implement non-profit projects. Unlike many other countries, Georgia offers simplified procedures to foreign national for legalised stay in the country. However, there is a flip side to this simplicity: obtaining a residence permit is extremely difficult and holding this status does not mean that the customs will not reject its holder an entry to the country without any explanation or justification.¹¹ Unpredictable rejections by the customs keep migrants under constant stress. Even though the number of such cases is statistically insignificant, the rationale remains unknown. In 2022 and early 2023 it was thought to have something to do with the participation in anti-war campaigns, a status of foreign agent, affiliation with some of Russia’s non-governmental organisations, or a linkage with the Russian opposition groups.¹² However, even those who did not meet these criteria, were rejected an entry to Georgia. Therefore, crossing the border can be perceived as

¹¹ «Crucial border: why Georgia denies entry to a number of Russian activists and journalists» JAM News 27.06.22 <https://jam-news.net/crucial-border-why-georgia-denies-entry-to-a-number-of-russian-activists-and-journalists/>

¹² Как часто гражданам России отказывают в ВНЖ в Грузии—последние данные, Sputnik Грузия, 01.12.2023 <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20231201/kak-chasto-grazhdanam-rossii-otkazyvayut-v-vnzh-v-georgii--poslednie-dannye-284648410.html>

a game at which one can turn out lucky or unfortunate. Vague decision making and the absence of clearly defined criteria for rejecting entry to the country appear to have caused overwhelming feeling of anguish among migrants.¹³

'From my inner circle two individuals could not re-enter Georgia. They had been living in Georgia, they had rent contracts. They flew to Russia for a week to close their businesses and could not enter the country. I am very afraid of this as I do not know where to go'. (male, 43)

Inability to obtain a stable legal status is one of the common reasons why Russians choose to leave Georgia. Applicants are not provided with justification for refusal to be granted residence permit. In addition, they might get rejected at the border as they try to enter Georgia. Those who have relatives in Georgia, students, public school pupils and their parents are more likely to obtain residence permit.¹⁴

Each and every high-profile development in Georgia's political scene rings an alarm bell since they might signal the introduction of harsher immigration policies especially when many Georgians do not shy away from showing their concerns and irritation with a wide-scale immigration of Russians in the country.

'Compared to what I had been told, everything appeared to be much better in Tbilisi. However, I am afraid of speaking Russian. I remember that even when my mom called me, I tried to not speak Russian in the street (...) I was happy to see flags [Ukrainian flags. The author's note] all over the place as if they gave me the sense of security. I felt truly safer than I had ever felt in Russia. However, I also had a weird sensation of being hated by everyone around me even though throughout four months that I have been in Georgia, there has been not a single case of discriminatory treatment or mistreatment against me'. (Male, 25).

Destinations chosen by migrants vary a great deal: EU countries, the Balkans, and countries of Latin America. Many have left for South-East Asian countries. As time passes pessimism takes over hope with regard positive changes in Russia. According to surveys administered by the Outrush, in September 2022, only 7% of migrants said they expected the situation in Russia to improve.¹⁵ Findings of surveys and interviews provide several possible reasons for such an overwhelming sense of despair: total desperation with regard to the prospects of changes in power in the country: many respondents point out that they feel helpless because of their inability to contribute to any positive change. The feeling of helplessness was present even before the launch of the full-scale aggression, in fact, quite some time ago. Society is overwhelmed with looming manifestation of post-traumatic stress syndrome as soldiers are coming back home from the frontline (at a small scale the PTSD has already started showing up in violent acts committed by returned Wagner fighters). One cannot miss on a strikingly apparent burden of a division splitting society into supporters and opponents of the war. Many respondents say they find it impossible to live side by side with those who support not only Putin but also military actions.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ «The secret life of Russians in Georgia» Eurazianet 21.06.2023, *Giorgi Lomsadze*
<https://eurasianet.org/the-secret-life-of-russians-in-georgia-0>

¹⁵ Kamalov, Emil, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva, and Margarita Zavadskaya. 2023. "The Russian Rhizome: A Social Portrait Of New Immigrants". Re: Russia. Jan 2023. <https://re-russia.net/en/review/262/>

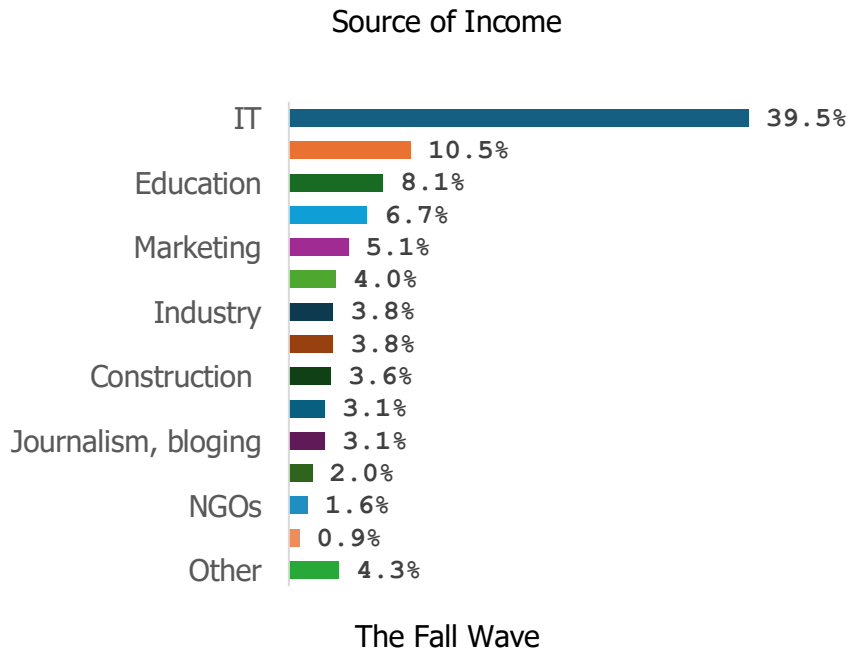
'Before the war we had hoped that we, the people would succeed in changing the government and that we would all live in future Russia, the one which had been in everybody's dreams. However, on February 24 (2022) I sadly realized that the Russia of the future died as early as January 2021, when Alexey Navalny's indictment was announced. Announcing someone as a foreign agent let's say on every Friday has turned into a chore. Still, we had had hope. It all ended after 24, as if a curtain fell, as if we all came to realization that nothing will ever change.'

(male,27)

Presumably, the majority of Russians whose immigration turns out as 'successful' (meaning that they will not face returning to Georgia because of personal circumstances) will continue living abroad after the end of the war regardless of its outcome. Many will stay in Georgia unless there are substantial changes to their living conditions. However, some groups of migrants will take to other countries and some other 'popular' destinations will emerge along the way.

2. Professions, jobs, and adaptation to working environment

Both surveys revealed the top three most popular fields/sectors of occupation among Russian immigrants in Georgia accounting for 65% of employment: information technologies, education and culture, art and design.



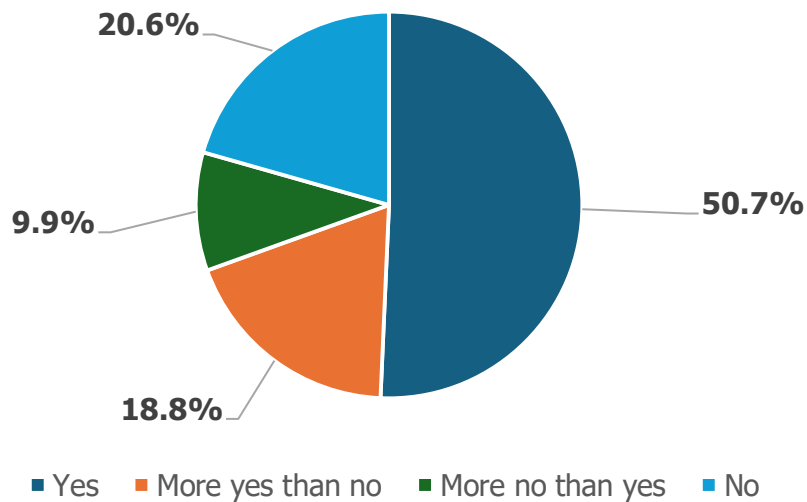
It can be assumed that 65% of migrants in the spring wave and 70% of those arriving in the fall had remote jobs. This means that only a third of the migrants had to find jobs. The findings suggest that there have been two strategies that the migrants use to cope with the problem of unemployment:

In terms of adaptation, it is interesting to estimate the percentage of newcomers with remote jobs by the time they arrived in Georgia. The first one implies search for remote work in one's field of specialization or quick retraining to in order to be able to find a job.

'I was studying at the university and planning to find a job with my specialization - sociology/anthropology. Perhaps, I would continue with a graduate program and find a job in applicable research. Instead, I had to drop out and start a remote job in b2b retail of medical equipment. In parallel, I am learning web development.' (female, 23)

In the fall cohort, there are fewer migrants who can work remotely (50.7% as compared to 64.9% in the spring wave)

Did you have a permit to work remotely?



Survey administered between November 2022 and January 2023 through an online questionnaire

Arrival of a large number of migrants and search for consistent source of income beyond usual social ties, gave a momentum to changing field of occupation. Doctors, sociologies, journalists and musicians 'moved to IT' field, pursued education and training in such fields as web development, data analysis, QA testing etc.

'By the time I had left my job in Moscow, one of the things that I could do was to popularise science. I start this back when I was working at the institute: I wrote popular science articles and gave lectures. When I moved to Georgia, I continued this line of work (...) Eventually I started giving popular science lectures in Tbilisi, mostly for immigrant audience. In parallel, within the first week of my arrival, I started an online training in data analysis through the 'Яндекс Практикум' platform. I contemplated this idea even before I had arrived here, but I

was still hesitant. However, faced by a total limbo, when I had no idea what would come next, where I would live and on what source of income, I decided just in case, to acquire specialisation which would allow me to work remotely and get paid. I was lucky since I had already had certain scientific knowledge.’ (male, 32)

‘I realised that together with the war, everything fell apart. I had been building my career in academia, I defended my candidacy thesis, I was building my international networks with colleagues from Europe and China, I tried to have my articles published in international journals, but the war turned everything into ashes... I made a decision to give up on academia and find a job in IT field. Yes, it does sound like a cliché, but this is the only way to avoid falling into poverty as a refugee. I realized that I could support myself for a year and after that I had to acquire new skills and enter a new field (...) Now I am building my life here working for an IT startup.’ (male, 35)

For those who was looking for a remote job, finding a source of income outside Russia was most important for ethical reasons: ‘I do not want to fund the war’, for technical reasons: ‘it is getting increasingly difficult to wire transfer money from Russia to other countries, and for security reasons: ‘I do not want to create problems for my colleagues because of my actions’, ‘I do not want to depend on unstable exchange rate of RUB’. For others it was not a necessary precondition.

The second strategy is to search for offline job. Russian immigrants who left the country after the launch of the full-scale aggression, or several years prior the attack, have an extremely high level of mutual trust (more than 90% among immigrants of 2022-2023 in various countries reported that they trust other Russian immigrants).¹⁶ Also, ‘migrants attract migrants’, a statement which seems particularly true during selecting a country. Migrants of this ‘flux’ mostly rely on the networks of friends or compatriots in general.

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Therefore, migrants are mostly engaged in providing services to the Russian community. In Georgia, the majority of employed migrants do not work remotely but in organisations and businesses – cafes, bars, shops, schools, workshops etc, operated by other migrants ¹⁷ Also, there are numerous cases of private practice: visage artists, private tutors, yoga instructors, massage therapists, etc. Such ‘migrant economy’ is characteristic of places where competition between migrants is high.

¹⁶ Kamalov, Emil, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva, and Margarita Zavadskaya. 2023. “New Russian Migrants Against the War: Political Action in Russia and Abroad ”. Policy Memo for Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. June 2023. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20458.pdf>

¹⁷ Baranova, Vlada, Chigaleichik, Ekaterina, Kuleshova, Anna, and Podolsky, Verena. 2023. “Russian migration to Armenia and Georgia in 2022: enclave economy and local employment”. Caucasus Edition. Journal of conflict transformation. 2003(8). <https://caucasusedition.net/russian-migration-to-armenia-and-georgia-in-2022-enclave-economy-and-local-employment/>

Emigration with preserving a job is yet another model. In this model, emigration is organised by a company. It implies selection with another office and in some cases, salaries are paid in local currency etc. Some companies agree to pay costs related to an employee's stay in a hotel, living expenses and food during the first months of the transfer. Mass relocation of companies has given rise to a phenomenon known as 'relocants', the most protected group of migrants. Transfer of one's own business is also an option which is similar to the previously described model in that it allows for preserving the same source of income. Since 2022, the number of companies registered in Georgia by Russian nationals have been on a rise: from March to June 2022, there were 6.400 Russian companies registered in Georgia which exceeds the number of those companies registered throughout the entire 2021.¹⁸

There are no alternative means to find a job in Georgia first and foremost by pervasive unemployment. Poor or no knowledge of the Georgian language and the absence of a circle of acquaintances. There is also a lack of understanding as to what one can do especially when locals often do not want to hire Russian nationals. Therefore, migrants often experience fear of rejection.

The research has revealed considerable diversity of professions and levels of income among migrants. At the same time, those who arrived in Georgia during the first year of migration were busy with building horizontal linkages, creating support networks and social capital which remains in use. Migrants can access loads of information through numerous chats created by organisations (for instance, the one set up by Ковчера, or by Nikolay Levshits' telegram channel) or individuals which then snowballed into a huge information exchange platform. Many migrants have a rather creative approach to finding a source of income by opening their own business the majority of which serves the migrant community.

3. Civic Activism

A presumed starting point of Russia's political exodus is believed to be the year of 2012 when Fair Elections movement lost to Vladimir Putin who was re-elected for the third term. From that point on, the importance of the political factor grew progressively and by 2022 it was the biggest driver for leaving the country for an overwhelming majority of migrants. Over the course of the past decade mostly students, civic activists and journalists, also middle-class representatives in general dominated the flows of migrants.¹⁹

In 2022-2023 the majority of migrants were engaged in one or another type of activism: According to information published by Outrush, a research group, in March 2022, 80% of Russian migrants had participated in protests or performances, supported those mistreated and abused at rallies, written letters to political prisoners, fought for the protection of human rights before they fled Russia.^{20 21}

¹⁸ Transparency International Georgia, 2023.

¹⁹ Fomina, Joanna. (2021). Political Dissent and Democratic Remittances: The Activities of Russian Migrants in Europe. NY: Routledge.

²⁰ Kamalov, Emil, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva, and Margarita Zavadskaya. 2023. "New Russian Migrants Against the War: Political Action in Russia and Abroad". Policy Memo for Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. June 2023. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20458.pdf>

²¹ It should be noted that while early types of activism – linguistic and ethnic, environmental, feminist, LGBTQ+ etc, positioned, though to varying degree, as public and non-political movements, in recent years it has become increasingly impossible due to spiking pressure on any type of resistance.

The situation drastically changed in immigration. Some of the actions maintain their relevance and topicality while others, as relayed by informants, have come to lose their original significance.

Activists have to face multiple difficulties: on the one hand, they are afraid that their activism might harm those close to them who are still in Russia, and suffer from identity crisis on the other, since manifestations of activism outside of Russia remain invisible for Russian authorities who are recipients of these acts and actions, and therefore, these efforts are in vain. They nevertheless choose to carry on in some form (both online and offline - performances, for example), however, eventually many admit that they are not sure if such acts are necessary and therefore lose motivation.

It should be noted that right after the launch of the full-scale aggression, anti-war activism, a new form, emerged, and along with it, pressure against all activists involved spiked. According to the assessment of OVD-info, since 24 February 2022, almost 20.000 individuals have been detained for their anti-war protest.^{22 23} In the spring 2022, Russian authorities passed laws on 'dissemination of fake news' and 'discrediting of the Russian Armed Forces' for administrative and criminal prosecution. Almost no one accused of the actions stipulated by these laws have been acquitted.

It can be stated that everyone whose decision to migrate was driven by the political factors, have to **constantly choose between the danger and necessity of political actions** since the situation has been progressively going downhill with new censorship laws and new cases of political persecution.

Making donations to Russian NGOs and opposition media appears to be the most popular form of civic activism for Russian migrants. Due to the law on foreign agents and a looming threat to be proclaimed as an undesirable organisation, many organisations operating in the country solely depends on donations from various donors. Moreover, transfers need to be made from Russian bank cards since if transferred from cards of foreign banks, might pose danger for a recipient.

Some migrants take responsibility for disseminating information about the war, corruption, repressions etc which might create serious problems for those who are still in Russia. Some informants state that this line of work is their obligation, since one has to write about these problems, especially those who reside outside of Russia and are less susceptible to threats and risks. It is important to note that part of immigrants, who acknowledge the importance of all this, still choose not to take a risk and refrain from openly writing in the internet because they might have to travel to Russia to attend to their business, or are afraid that by doing so, they might put their relatives still residing in Russia in harm's way.

²² Krawatzek, Félix, De Sisto, Isabelle, Soroka, George (2023). Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine. Center for East European and International Studies (ZOIS) Report 2/2023. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine>

²³ «Persecution of the anti-war movement report. November 2023» OVD-Info, 29.11.2023 <https://en.ovdinfo.org/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-november-2023>

'Participation in rallies here has truly helped us to express our emotions – mainly anger. In other words, all these negative feelings which have piled up and still continue to do so (...) We would attend all rallies in front of the embassy, Rustaveli Avenue, squares – we attended all [rallies], we came to attend all of them just to express [our emotions] together with people, to shout together, to yell the truth about Putin, and we hoped that someday we would be understood' (male, 26).

A discussion about anti-war and anti-Putin protests is a separate question. Up until February 2023, such protests were a regular occurrence in Tbilisi. Motivations based on which Russians would make choices to participate or not can vary. Pro-participation arguments can be worded in the following way: 'it is important to support those who remain in Russia. We should be always demonstrating our solidarity', 'it is important to us, it is the voice of our conscience', 'it is important to show to locals that we are against the war and Putin'. The most common anti-participation arguments are as follow: 'there is no point since we have no influence on what is going on in Russia, when we are not there', 'there is no point since we are invisible there or here'.

'I have spotted interesting differences with rallies in Russia because it seemed that everything was as usual: people with slogans and posters in their hands stood against the Russian authorities. I joined them, yelled what I had to shout out loud and then I was overwhelmed with a strange sensation: what is going on here? Where is OMON [a special police branch] to quell us? Who should I be running from? Whom am I standing against here? Where is a conflict? In my mind, rallies and protests are always associated with a conflict, rather than mere expression of one's opinion. And then it occurred to me that no one is going to quell us, nobody is going to argue with us, or restrict us. It was amazing to feel that it was somewhat a European protest, when you are free to express your opinion. On the other hand, I could not understand why I was doing this'. (Male, 31)

Also, localized activities in a new country have been an important component of civic activism pursued by migrants. First and foremost, it implies providing support to Ukrainian refugees and compatriots who have escaped repressions including those who have sought refuge in other countries, as well as potential risk groups (i.e. LGBT activists since the proclamation of LGBT movements as extremist organisations).

In the spring 2022, many initiatives emerged on part of Russians residing in Georgia, in support of Ukrainian refugees. Some of them are still active as of today: Choostohelp, Charity, Emigrationforaction, Volunteers Tbilisi. Some of these activities have been formalized, others have established organisations. Many emigres help out stray animals or are engaged in environmental activism. Volunteerism alleviates the burden of war and allows people to overcome the stress of migration. Some of the informants point out that volunteering gave them an opportunity to find people who stood very close to them in terms of ideas and values.

'For instance, we lead a movement of volunteers to organize Saturdays. I am not an organizer; I just stick to them. There are Russians, Ukrainians, Belarus, and Georgians as well as Koreans, Japanese, Americans, French etc in our movement – an international community of some sort. After activities, we communicate with each other, even organize joint picknicks. We are all on the same wave sharing ideas. They are all brilliant. I got to know many good people together with whom I am implementing my own project'. (Female, 51)

As for local agenda, migrants try to stand aside. First of all, for many of them not enough time has passed by to perceive the country as their own. Secondly, many have not yet made up their mind about staying here’.

‘We understand local politics to a certain degree. But we do not poke our noses there. We are interested but we are not citizens in order to attempt to change certain things. We simply have our opinions. That is all’. (Female, 25)

However, certain developments unfolding in the receiving country, still tend to touch feelings and experience of migrants and push them towards activism. Expressing solidarity amidst Azerbaijan’s advance towards Nagorno-Karabakh and its reunification with Azerbaijan and mass protests following the government’s attempt to adopt a foreign agent law in Georgia in March 2023. appeared to have been the case. There was a live discussion going on among civic activists around the question whether they should participate in these rallies. Opinions were divided into two groups: the first group insisted that the failure of civic resistance in Russia, which is one of the main drivers of emigration, must spark active fight for freedom in any country.

‘It feels like the past you tried so hard to escape, is catching up with your’ (male, 41). I participated because I am a citizen of the world and in general, every time I witness injustice, I feel that it is important to express your own stance. This is what is the most important. Secondly, I do not like a paradigm according to which I am still a visitor. It’s been a year and a half – am I still considered a guest?’ (Male, 40).

Opponents claim that migrants who are not citizens, have no rights to interfere in the politics. ‘I believe that foreign nationals should not participate in local political affairs. There might be some exceptions, for example, for those who have residence permit or are married to local residents, who will accompany them. However, in general, this is something that should be done by locals, not foreigners.’

There is a third – pragmatic view, according to which, supporting opposition forces is not beneficial for migrants. Some opposition politicians support harsher policies towards Russian migrants and believe the latter to be agents of Russian influence.

This discussion contributed to deliberations about whether migrants should define their status based on their participation or non-participation in civic activism. The absence of a formal status creates ambiguities for migrants and forces them to make individualised decisions.

‘Only few of my friends would go. We also made a statement on behalf of our organisation with regard to the foreign agents law. We offered free soup and drinks to participants of the rally who could come to us and get warm. We had night shifts. However, the majority did not turn up. By the way, it was surprising to see so few familiar faces.’ (Male, 40)

It should be noted that in some cases Russians get involved in matters related to not only Georgia, but the entire region. For instance, an initiative was launched to provide financial and humanitarian assistance to refugees from Nagorno Karabakh in September and October 2023.

4. Migrants community

Even though migrants represent a rather heterogenous group, they share a feeling of common fate stemming from not only similar drivers of migration and difficulties they face, but also from them being perceived as a single group from outside. As mentioned earlier, migrants are not divided into 'waves.' New migrants merge into a general picture: they frequent the same places, share apartments with those who have arrived earlier. Early relocants actively support newcomers to adapt: they explain local arrangements, allow to stay with them for some time, explain the local context, introduce favourite places.

There is a striking phenomenon - Russians' concentration at the same spots (countries/cities). Below are the reasons for such concentration:

- High level of solidarity and mutual support (including organized help - e.g. shelters etc to private initiatives – helping strangers etc)
- High level of trust – many assume that a new immigrant that they meet will be likely to share similar views and values ('I like many things here, but most importantly, whenever I meet someone, I do not need to control what I say. There is a 99% chance that the person will be adequate enough to agree that war is evil. That is how adequacy is assessed.' (Male, 43))
- Close friends/relatives/social circle are already here.
- There is always something going on - lectures in the Russian language, concerts, political meetings, demonstrations etc.

Results of the interviews demonstrate that almost all migrants live in a Russian-language bubble primarily because of fear of not being accepted rather than being a subject of aggression. The second cause is the absence of the necessity to establish new contacts because there is a circle of compatriots and immigrants find it easy to establish relations which build as if on their own.

'Tranquillity and full realisation that we are safe now... I feel that I cannot relax, not because I am afraid that the Russian authorities will find us here. But there are some negative attitudes towards those who came from Russia. It is not that we live in fear... I do not even know how to describe this condition... we are cautious while doing stuff. We know that people here are nice and adequate. But we are also well aware that there are people who have radical views about those who arrived in Georgia from Russia and your stance does not matter at all to them.'
(Male, 27)

4.1 'We are in the same boat'

An important episode which revealed the perception of shared fate occurred aftermath the announcement of 'partial' mobilisation in Russia. A new flux of migrants took to the Georgian border. Together with organising rapid support operation (with individuals as well as organisations and initiative groups), at least four open meetings were held for newcomers and

action points (guides and booklets) were disseminated both in print and online including primary information about the adaptation to living in Georgia.²⁴

'A friend of mine added me to a chat 'Экстренный трип в Грузию'(impromptu trip to Georgia). When I joined there were more than 300 individuals in there. By the time I had flown to Georgia, that is in a month, there were already 700 members of the group (...) that is where we got to know and supported each other. You were writing stuff like you are still in Moscow, or already in Georgia or in Peter (St. Petersburg) or elsewhere and asking for help, to be given some directions. People would tell each other that 'everything is ok, everything is all right', 'you are smart and doing great'. It is natural that we got to know each other. I was sitting in that chat all the time because it was the only place which created the feeling of something good and kind remaining, the feeling that humanity had not died yet'. (female, 27)

Meetings and guides were primarily used to disseminate technical information: how to find accommodation, how to obtain a debit or credit card, which providers operate in Georgia etc. However, every information material contained rules for interacting with locals, and 'must know' facts about Georgia:

- Do not strike a conversation in Russian
- 20% of Georgia is occupied by Russia
- Make yourself familiar with materials concerning the August 2008 war, 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war and the Russian occupation

Initiatives of migrants from the earlier wave towards newcomers are outstanding: since migrants (all Russian speakers in this particular case) are perceived as a unified group, everyone is responsible for maintaining a shared image of the group. In this case, the identity of migrants is defined not only internally, through the self-perception of an individual, but from outside, by receiving society and other migrants. The principle of 'everybody for themselves' does not quite work for these groups.

4.2 Activists community

Almost all immigrants keep in touch with their compatriots residing in other countries as well as with those still remaining in Russia. Activists find it important to support human rights organisations and civic activists working in Russia. However, providing support to them is complicated. For instance, donations from bank card of foreign countries might be considered as 'foreign funding' and serve as a ground for proclaiming a recipient as foreign agent. Many of our respondents mentioned this threat. For this reason, activists use only Russian cards for making donations. In addition, many events are held in Tbilisi hosting activists who continue living and working in Georgia. Such events serve as a venue for strengthening personal relations and support networks and exchanging information.

Russian activists in European countries constitute another dimension of relationships. Those who are able to travel to European countries (through a Schengen visa or residence permit) are considered to be privileged. Also, during 2022-2023 many activists received humanitarian visa and left for Germany. However, those residing in Germany have so far failed to create tightly

²⁴ A guide developed under the frame of the Emigration for Action project
<https://efahelpdesk.notion.site/efahelpdesk/339c3a1d92414566bb053b9dc9cb6ff1>

knit communities as visa holders are randomly accommodated in various regions of the country. Therefore, activists are scattered all over the country. It can be assumed that links between the activists are less dependent on borders. Berlin often hosts events for activists in the Russian language with political-opposition views (for example, 'anti-war initiatives platform', 'assembly of foreign agents', 'assembly of Russian municipal MPs', Sakharov Centre conferences). According to the respondents of the survey, Berlin has a reputation of an 'activists centre in the EU' while Tbilisi has a reputation of a 'centre beyond the EU'. In spite of mass outflux of activists from Georgia, many activists and journalists still remain in Tbilisi which hosts regular events supporting their work or activities serving to facilitate experience sharing, as well as training.

Quantitative data suggest that trust among Russian emigres towards each other remains deep even a half year since the commencement of the full-fledged war.²⁵ We believe, that one of the drivers of such a high level of trust is strong ties among immigrants in various countries as well as high mobility. Frequent changes of places of residence facilitates accelerated exchange of news and information among various migrant communities.

4.3 Interrelationship and attitudes

Many immigrants are willing to learn Georgian language, but few pursue it in a consistent way since the learning of Georgian has more of a symbolic and recreational rather than pragmatic purpose. Being able to communicate in Georgian is considered as a sign of respect which many find important. Only those who are very enthusiastic or privileged, pursue the learning of Georgian as, provided that they have sufficient time, it is an interesting and, at the same time, exotic hobby. A lack of long-term plans also undermines their motivation. Many do not have strength, ability, or money to learn Georgian and that is why they prefer to improve their English language skills. Most migrants communicate with locals either in Russian or English.

'When we first arrived, I started learning Georgian with YouTube videos. But I managed to listen to just few lectures before losing motivation since I had no clear idea as to why I was learning Georgian. I have no linguistic barrier since Georgians can speak either English or Russian'. (*Male,28*)

'Initially I felt awkward. I was afraid of speaking Russian. I just got used to the idea that I should start a conversation in English. People guessed that I was Russian and would move on to Russian themselves. In addition, I go to places frequented by Russian speakers and therefore, I have no problems. All my Georgian friends can understand and speak Russian. (*Female,33*)

'Here, 90% of young people speak English, and 90% of older generation speak Russian. There is no need to learn Georgian. Of course, for the sake of courtesy, it would be good [to know Georgian]. I have been here for a half year, and I only managed to learn three phrases. (*Male, 43*)

One of the main problems faced by migrants is that to Georgian society Russian emigres are associated more with tourism and leisure in the time of war rather than anti-war and anti-Putin activities. They are often perceived by locals as well-off people – modern hipsters of some sort.

²⁵

The stereotype causes disappointment in those groups of migrants who are neither rich nor modern hipsters. In addition, they often remain invisible since they do not spend their time in popular cafes and bars, nor do they live in the downtown. This situation triggers various reactions: some try to ignore it, others prefer to focus on positive relationships or lock up in the circles of immigrants and rarely, in expat community. Some wear Ukrainian symbols in order to openly express their own stance.

Aggressive anti-Russian graffiti have become an important element of the city landscape over the past two years. Immigrants who live in Tbilisi try to turn a blind eye to these writings and perceive the world as they see it.²⁶ Respondents of the interviews mostly say this does not concern them ('I am not a putinist,' 'I do not support the war', 'I support Ukraine' etc) or share the spirit of such writings, as for example, Fuck Russia, Fuck Putin or Russia is a terrorist state). Others say that initially these slogans would catch their eyes and caused them anxiety. However, they got to seeing them rather soon and simply ignored them. Some believe that these writings have been done by Russian nationals themselves. This view became particularly popular after a Russian citizen, a confirmed author of one these slogans, had actually admitted to making it.²⁷ In the end of the day, every newcomer has to develop strategies to cope with outpoured aggression and unacceptance.

'Writings on the walls here – 'Go to hell Rusnya' or something like that, do not concern me, because I do not identify with 'Rusnyas'. At the same time, I truly acknowledge the degree of my own responsibility. The guilt that I feel is more related to my knowing that there was an evil sitting up there, but I carried on with my work and fed him with my taxes. That is my crime - that is how I perceive it. This is and only this. That I tried to fight against authorities, this was...do you see what I mean... I cannot blame myself – in fact I was an active citizen, wasn't I...(female,51)

Many representatives of the new wave of migrants, especially young people, have great faith in feminist ideas. They also support LGBTQ+ community, are open to ethnic and racial diversity and decolonisation agenda. Russian migrants believe themselves and Georgian society to be carriers of European/liberal values. Many respondents said that these very values shaped their decision to choose Georgia as their destination country.

'I think that Armenia is more conservative and pro-Putin while Georgia is more European and democratic. However, there are still some detail (...) Let's talk about police. It is incomprehensible feeling that you are not afraid of the police considering that I was more afraid of the police than some thugs in Russia. This is truly amazing – feeling yourself protected and free.' (Female, 51)

'I really want to get to know locals, especially young people because - and I might be wrong here, that at a glance, I think that Georgia's future is in hands of its youth – they are drastically different from older generation. It is not only that they are more Europeanised, but you feel higher degree of freedom in them'. (Female, 23)

²⁶ Korableva E. (2023). Migrants from Russia in Georgia during the War in Ukraine: Political Performance and the "UnpredictableBorder" .Russian analytical digest. 301, Sept. 2023 <https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>

²⁷ «Как музыкант из Омск извинился за русофобскую надпись, которую написал на здании в Тбилиси »Medialeaks, 30.10.2022 <https://medialeaks.ru/3010tat-str-sct-tbi-russians/>

At the same time, other respondents might have dissenting views when it comes to the description of situation in Georgia: Georgia, a 'post-Soviet country' with never-ending modernization, people here mostly 'do not want to work' and therefore, it is difficult to have business relations with them even when there is an opportunity for this.

Interviews demonstrate that there is no homogenous perception of Georgia and Georgians among migrants: on the one hand, there is 'cultural affinity' since it is 'post-Soviet', but on the other hand 'it is more liberated', and 'Europeanised'. When it comes to freedom and liberty, the culture of protest and changes of governments in the independent Georgia are mentioned most often by the respondents. 'Cultural affinity' implies the knowledge of Russian and corruption, however, they find it difficult to mention specific examples.

Generalisation of the above said is extremely difficult. Most often, immigrants can only describe attitudes towards them at a level of feeling. Any new social contact may turn out as friendly or drastically negative. There is a commonly held view that this might be age specific: older generation seems more positive or neutral while young people, when they do not try to avoid contacts with Russians, 'check' if they have shared views on the Russian politics. It is also important to note that tensions between migrants and local communities are more tangible in the capital Tbilisi while in Georgia's regions they are perceived as 'tourists' or 'foreigners.'

Conclusion

- Both the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as mass support of military actions against Ukraine among Russians sent shockwaves to all respondents. Fear, depression and bewilderment dominated overall sentiments following 24 February 2022 and the announcement of mobilisation in Russia.
- There is **insignificant difference** between the two **waves** of immigrants of 2022 (following the invasion and the announcement of partial mobilisation). The average age is 32 years. The majority of migrants were from the two largest cities - Moscow and St Petersburg, and most of them had savings which would suffice for six months or longer. The only significant difference lies in a gender makeup. In the spring 2022 there was an almost equal number of men and women while men accounted for two third of the cohort explained by a fear of mobilisation.
- The **main drivers** of migration: potential political persecution, censorship, dire psychological condition, threat of mobilisation and lack of future prospects. Based on the responses of the respondents, drivers of migration can be defined as political. However, one should keep in mind that it is almost impossible to draw a line between political and economic causes.
- Migrants are characterised with a **high level of mobility** both in a short-term (travelling) and long-term (changing a city or country of residence) perspective. Under such circumstances, it is very difficult to estimate the exact number of migrants currently residing in Georgia, but according to commonly held view, the Russian community in the country totals to 100.000 migrants.
- Migration **has downscaled** and so has the number of migrants. From the very beginning, considerable part of migrants considered Georgia as a transit country. Further relocation trends are linked to a desire to improve economic conditions, seeking long-term legalisation or an opportunity to obtain a new citizenship.

- As time passes there is less optimism with regard to **possibilities of positive changes in Russia**. Migrants are also concerned with long-term consequences of the war and propaganda for Russian society. Majority of Russian migrants are likely to continue living in immigration after the end of the war. Many will stay in Georgia unless conditions of their life here change dramatically.
- Top three professions/vocations among the newcomers are: IT, education, culture, art, and design. By the time of arrival, approximately 70% of migrants had remote jobs. There are **three main strategies for economic adaptation**: 1) search for a remote job 2) search for an offline job, and 3) starting business. Remote jobs seem to be highly prioritised since it allows its holder to mitigate risks associated with displacement. The majority of the employed in Georgia work for organisations and businesses operated by other migrants.
- Majority of migrants in the new wave have engaged in **civic activism through various means** including participation in protests rallies and performances, supporting victims of violence during protests, observing elections, writing letters to political prisoners, and protecting human rights.
- Activists are afraid of harming themselves and their loved ones in Russia. They also suffer from lowered motivation because of perceived futility of their activism.
- **Civic activism abroad can be pursued by**: making donations to Russian NGOs and opposition media, disseminating information about the war, corruption and repressions, attending anti-war demonstrations. Russians very rarely participate in protests held in Georgia. Many question reasonability of participation in this type of activities.
- Many **volunteer** to support organisations who help Ukrainians or compatriots who are suffer persecution in Russia. Some of them support stray animals while others are engaged in environmental activism. Volunteering brings the feeling of relief while coping with the war and help migrants to overcome the stress of the war and migration.
- Uncertainties with the status and 'disapproval' of their stay in the country **hampers migrants' participation in political and civic activism related to Georgia**
- Newcomers perceive themselves as members of the same group and this is how they are perceived from outside. Migrants of 2022-2023 waves as well as those who arrived earlier, live in a **Russian language bubble** since there is no need to step outside of this bubble. Living in the bubble is also driven by the fear of rejection.
- Concentration of Russians in certain locations indicates that migrants are **inclined to unite and live among 'their own kind of people'** not only for the sake of safety and protection but also because of shared views, context and lifestyle.
- Almost all migrants maintain contacts not only with those who reside in other countries but also with those who remain in Russia. **Tbilisi is considered as one of the hubs for activists in migration**. Tbilisi routinely hosts events for not only activists residing currently in Russia but in other countries as well.
- **Learning Georgian is a popular idea among newcomers**. However, but not everyone pursues this goal since it is uncertain how long they will stay in Georgia, also, there is no pressing need to learn Georgian, and it is extremely difficult to learn Georgian from scratch. Basic knowledge of Georgia is considered a sign of respect for the country and its culture.
- The image of Russian migrants as a wealthy and privileged group with the propensity to live in comfort causes disappointment among the **most vulnerable migrants** who suffer financial and other problems. These individuals mostly remain invisible since they have no means to spend some time outside their jobs and homes.

- New migrants mentally filter negative attitudes towards them since they believe that they have no power to counter such acts. In addition, self-perception also varies greatly among migrants. Any new social contact may turn out friendly as well as drastically hostile. Tensions are more tangible in Tbilisi and less so in other regions of Georgia.