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# ZOIS REPORT

## **RUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN GEORGIA AND GERMANY: ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE**

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## Summary

Russia's war against Ukraine has uprooted millions of Ukrainians, with many fleeing abroad and others displaced within Ukraine. The war also prompted a new wave of migration from Russia. After 24 February 2022 and after the announcement of a partial mobilisation in September 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens left their home country for various countries, including former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia and European countries. While not all of these migrants are politically engaged, a vocal minority has long-standing experience of civic and political activism and saw migration as a way of escaping repression and continuing their oppositional activities remotely. Others with little or no previous experience of activism have been mobilised in the context of the war. And in countries with pre-existing Russian migrant communities, sections of this population have also engaged in humanitarian and anti-war activities.

This report analyses how politically and socially engaged migrants from Russia (re-)organise themselves at a critical time. We focus on Georgia and Germany as prominent host countries for this migration. Despite differences in migration

regimes, the numbers of Russian migrants taken in, and attitudes to these newcomers, we observe more similarities than differences in migrant activism in Germany and Georgia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Russian migrants in these countries, we examine a variety of grassroots projects, focusing on anti-war and related fields of activism. Many observers and activists are chiefly concerned about the extent to which activists can influence developments in Russia from abroad. Yet the activists' political and civic engagement, while motivated by these developments, is not directed solely at the home country. We focus in particular on the four major audiences activists address: 1) civil society and the general population in Russia; 2) the host society and its institutions; 3) Russian migrants and their networks abroad; and 4) Ukrainian refugees in the host countries and Ukrainians in Ukraine. This qualitative research sheds light on a less visible, de-centralised form of migrant activism and its possible effects in a transnational context.

These are the key findings:

- Migrants remain closely attuned to developments within their country of origin but direct their actions towards diverse audiences in different countries and contexts. Activists and initiatives may address these target groups simultaneously through different and sometimes even the same actions, which can create tensions.
- In the context of war and war censorship, addressing audiences in Russia becomes especially challenging not only for anti-war activists within the country, but also for migrant activists. Homeland-oriented engagement covers a wide spectrum of activities ranging from disseminating independent information to the Russian population to monetary support and solidarity with civil society actors who remain in Russia. Activism also entails providing help with legal issues, psychological support, and practical tools to exit for those individuals and their families who are critical of the political regime in Russia and want or have to leave Russia.
- The relationship of Russian migrant activists with potential audiences in the two host societies differs significantly. Politically engaged Russian migrants in Georgia have little contact with Georgian society and its civil society organisations. They are conscious that their presence in Georgia can be associated with Russian imperial behaviour. The current Georgian debate on visa restrictions for Russian citizens and a generally cautious attitude towards newcomers may limit the scope of migrant engagement in the future and confirm migrants' doubts about their long-term prospects in Georgia.
- In Germany, the situation is different, partly due to the involvement of more established Russian migrants in anti-war and pro-democracy activism, and partly also to the different character of the war-induced migration there. Compared to their counterparts in Georgia, Russian migrant initiatives in Germany engage more with their target audiences, and their interactions with local civil society and political actors are more diverse. They make concrete

demands on German politics, calling for support for Ukraine, solidarity with Russian civil society actors and an unequivocal distancing from the Russian state. Furthermore, regime critics value the freedom of assembly and other favourable conditions for political activity in Germany. At the same time, the pro-war mobilisation of some other Russian-speaking migrants is a source of conflict.

- In both countries, activists share a common goal of supporting newcomers from Russia, community building, and establishing networks for civic and political engagement on-site and transnationally. There is a humanitarian and a political dimension to community building in this context: the activists aim to position themselves more visibly against the Kremlin regime. The goal is to counteract the social and political isolation of the newcomers and to encourage political engagement among those migrants who were previously rather apolitical. The latter has, however, proved more difficult than anticipated.
- Supporting newcomers in Germany is considered by activists among the more established migrant community as a way of consolidating the pro-democratic Russian diaspora. However, there are disparities in social and cultural capital between newer political migrants and activists who have lived in Germany longer, but were not necessarily engaged in politics prior to the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine. This makes cooperation and integration into existing initiatives challenging.
- In Georgia, providing informal social spaces and practical assistance for immigrants is important because it encourages networking and strengthens mutual trust between different segments of the migrant population.
- Providing humanitarian relief for Ukrainians, including refugees and displaced persons, has become an important field of engagement among Russian migrants. Here, direct interaction with Ukrainians remains possible to some degree, while cooperation in the area of politics is far more problematic.
- Germany's migration regime vis-à-vis Russian citizens is far less restrictive than in some other European countries, but it is more restrictive than in Georgia. This has shaped the character and extent of war-induced migration from Russia to Germany and also made lobbying for a humanitarian solution that prioritises people at risk of repression a viable field of activism for Russian migrant networks.

## Introduction

Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in profound humanitarian, economic, and social crises, with Ukrainians primarily affected. The war has forced millions of them to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, while many others remain internally displaced within Ukraine. It has also triggered a remarkable migratory movement of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens, who have left their home country for various destinations, including former Soviet republics in the Caucasus or Central Asia and European countries. While the majority of these migrants left in response to the changing political and societal climate, a vocal minority was politically active prior to departure and interprets their migration as a way of staying active and maintaining their political and social 'voices' for the home country from abroad. In some cases, people become engaged as a reaction to the Russian war and after leaving the country. The increased activism of pre-existing migrant communities in Europe can also be attributed to the war and totalitarian shifts in Russia. As a result, a transnational landscape of initiatives and individual activists engaged in anti-war projects, volunteering, social work, and public actions has been developing. However, the grassroots engagement of Russian migrants is not always visible to external actors within their host societies.

The grassroots engagement of Russian migrants is not always visible to external actors within their host societies.

With this report, we intend to contribute to a better understanding of Russian migrant activism in the context of the war. The report is based on a ZOiS study<sup>1</sup> and focuses on Georgia and Germany as important host countries for political migration from Russia, albeit for different reasons. The question of whether migrants retain their public 'voices' after exit—or whether they develop their 'voices' after exiting a repressive setting—is not new. At the same time, political and civic actions by migrants are directed not only towards their home country, but also address diverse actors and groups in their host countries and in the transnational space. We therefore want to take a closer look at the people Russian migrants speak to. The report addresses the following questions: What are the key characteristics of political and social engagement among Russian migrants in Germany and Georgia? Which audiences do they address with their actions? What challenges arise when the migrant activists address different audiences simultaneously?

Activism, in the context of this report, is broadly understood as grassroots action that involves coordination with others and/or is based on shared identities. It aims to challenge elements of the social, political, or cultural status quo, and address perceived injustices. As a person's involvement in activism does not depend on their self-identification as an 'activist', we spoke with individuals whose civic or political engagement significantly influenced their everyday lives, regardless of whether they identified as activists. The report deals with fields of engagement related to Russia's war against Ukraine: Firstly, we examine actions interpreted as primarily anti-war. Secondly, we include collective action with a humanitarian or other focus if it is framed in terms of resistance to or responsibility for the war, or

<sup>1</sup> This report is based on preliminary findings from our pilot study 'Political Migration from Russia and Azerbaijan', which explores the main characteristics of recent migration from Russia and Azerbaijan to Germany and Georgia in the context of authoritarian shifts: <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/research/research-clusters/migration-and-diversity/political-migration-from-russia-and-azerbaijan>

as support for Ukraine and Ukrainians. Based on interviews with activists, the report seeks to improve our understanding of Russian migrant engagement as grassroots activism and addresses the question of whether these migrants can become agents of change in a transnational space in times of war and crises.

### Data and methodology

The empirical data for this report was collected in Germany and Georgia. We conducted 7 expert interviews and 38 semi-structured in-depth interviews with people fulfilling the following criteria:<sup>2</sup>

- current or former Russian citizens,
- residing in Germany or Georgia,
- with emigration experience before or after 24 February 2022,
- involved in political and/or civic activism in the past and/or present.

The following table shows the distribution of the research participants across the two countries and by the period they migrated from Russia:

	Before 24 February 2022	After 24 February 2022
Germany	12	12
Georgia	5	9

All the interviews were conducted between July 2022 and August 2023 in the Russian language in Georgia (Tbilisi) and Germany (mainly in Berlin) in person and via Zoom. The interview guide included questions related to the socio-demographic characteristics of participants, their decision to emigrate and the situation of migration, the migration process and motivations to leave, civic and/or political activities prior to migration, life in the host country, current political and/or civic activities, and plans for the future.

Additionally, two field trips to Georgia in June and December 2022 enriched the empirical data with observations at selected locations and informal conversations with migrants at co-working spaces, bookstores, and activist events, as well as conversations with Georgian scholars and friends. A similar approach was taken in Germany.

Aware of the increased risks for political migrants and activists from Russia, we took measures to ensure the safety and careful treatment of their data, including default anonymisation. We used the MaxQDA software package for qualitative data analysis. The quotes published in the report are not exhaustive, but illustrate the most common patterns we identified. If we mention an affiliation when quoting an interviewee, this serves the purpose of contextualising their background and perspective. It does not imply that they are speaking on behalf of the initiative or organisation in question.

<sup>2</sup> We do not include data collected among political migrants from Azerbaijan, who, similar to their Russian counterparts, decided for political reasons to leave their home country for Georgia and later for Germany. A comparative view on two different groups' identity formation will be the subject of another publication.

## The latest wave of Russian migration

Often described as an 'exodus', the wave of war-induced migration from Russia has garnered significant attention from both the media and academic circles since 24 February 2022.<sup>3</sup> In this section, we will explore the reasons for the heightened interest in this current wave and provide a brief overview of its notable features, including the migrants' political involvement.

Accurate statistics regarding the number of Russians who have left the country since 24 February 2022 are difficult to come by. The project OK Russians estimated that at least 300,000 people had left Russia by mid-March 2022.<sup>4</sup> The sub-wave triggered by the mobilisation of army reservists in September 2022 further increased the number of people fleeing. Media outlets differ in the estimates they provide of the total number of Russians who left. Reuters, for instance, suggested that at least 500,000 Russian citizens departed after 21 September 2022,<sup>5</sup> while Forbes Russia reported that over 700,000 Russians have fled since the beginning of the war.<sup>6</sup>

Researchers identify two sub-waves within this latest Russian migration.<sup>7</sup> The first wave, between February 2022 and September 2022, primarily comprised politically aware individuals, international company employees concerned about job security, and political activists anticipating repressions. The second wave, prompted by the announcement of a partial mobilisation, included a large proportion of young men with no clear political position on the war.

The geography of the destination countries sets this Russian migration apart from previous waves. According to online panel surveys by the Out-Rush team, new Russian migrants have settled in over a hundred countries worldwide.<sup>8</sup> Given the urgency of their situation, these individuals had little choice in the matter of where they migrated, nor had they the opportunity to plan and prepare for emigration. Some opted for countries with no entry visa requirements (such as Georgia, Turkey and Israel) or without the need for an international passport (including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

These destinations served as temporary shelters for those hoping to wait out the initial months of the war or apply for entry documents to more desirable countries. According to Georgia's Minister of Internal Affairs, Vakhtang

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- 3 Juri Rescheto, 'Russian military call-up sparks major exodus,' Deutsche Welle, 24 September 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-military-call-up-sparks-major-exodus/a-63227879>
  - 4 Mansur Mirovalev, 'Hundreds of thousands flee Russia and Putin's "two wars",' Aljazeera, 18 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/18/why-white-collar-russians-flee-two>
  - 5 Felix Light, 'Desperation on Russia's borders as draft-eligible men flee,' Reuters, 27 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/desperation-russias-borders-draft-eligible-men-flee-2022-09-27/>
  - 6 Elena Tofanjuk and Julja Sapronova, 'Rossiju posle 21 sentjabrja pokinuli okolo 700 000 grazhdan,' Forbes, 4 October 2022, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/478827-rossiu-posle-21-sentabra-pokinuli-okolo-700-000-grazhdan>
  - 7 Irina Tumakova, 'Strana ubytiija,' Novaya Gazeta, 27 December 2022, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/12/27/strana-ubytiia>
  - 8 Emil Kamalov, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva and Margatita Zavadskaya, 'Russia's 2022 Anti-War Exodus: The Attitudes and Expectations of Russian Migrants,' PONARS, 6 September 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-2022-anti-war-exodus-the-attitudes-and-expectations-of-russian-migrants/>



Gomelauri, in 2022, the number of Russian nationals who crossed the Georgian border and entered the country was 869,874, while the number of Russians who crossed the border and left the country was 809,873. If we look at non-unique entries according to nationality in 2022, there is a 400% annual increase in the number of Russians coming in, the highest increase in comparison to other countries (See next section).

Available data on this wave of migration indicates that the departing population is generally younger, better off and more educated than the average Russian. The OutRush team compared their research participants with Levada Center data on the basic characteristics of the Russian population. Its findings revealed that approximately 80% of those who left had completed higher education or held MA/PhD degrees, compared to just 27% of the overall Russian population. New Russian migrants also tended to be better off, with 46% of participants able to afford relatively expensive appliances, compared to 26% of the total Russian population. Before 24 February 2022, around 94% of the sample was employed.<sup>9</sup>

The current wave of migration is not the first in modern Russia to be triggered by political factors. Previous instances of political migration were closely linked to domestic politics, including movements for free elections, protests like Bolotnaya Square (2012), and legislative measures exerting political pressure on civil society and the media.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent to Navalny's imprisonment in January 2021, a new wave of politically motivated Russians opted to leave, with visa-free Georgia emerging as a preferred destination.

The findings of the OutRush project indicate that new Russian migrants are more politically engaged than the average Russian, with many reporting recent civic activities and participation in protests and political actions. They also have a heightened interest in Russian domestic politics. Over two-thirds of respondents donated money to independent NGOs and media (February 2022). More than half experienced various forms of political pressure in Russia, including psychological pressure, detainment during protests, and police searches. At the same time, 44% of research participants reported having no experience of political pressure.<sup>11</sup>

Another survey revealed that over 40% of respondents in Georgia and Armenia feel a sense of responsibility for the political situation in Russia.<sup>12</sup> This study, based on data collected in December 2022, demonstrates that over 50% of respondents are in daily or weekly communication with people in Russia via social media or the telephone. Many migrants believe it is essential to maintain social ties with family members, colleagues, neighbours,

**New Russian migrants are more politically engaged than the average Russian.**

9 Emil Kamalov, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva and Margatita Zavadsкая, 'Russia's 2022 Anti-War Exodus: The Attitudes and Expectations of Russian Migrants', PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 790, 6 September 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-2022-anti-war-exodus-the-attitudes-and-expectations-of-russian-migrants/>

10 Joanna Fomina, 'Voice, exit and voice again: democratic remittances by recent Russian emigrants to the EU', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47.11, (2021): 2439.

11 Emil Kamalov, Veronika Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva and Margatita Zavadsкая, 'Russia's 2022 Anti-War Exodus: The Attitudes and Expectations of Russian Migrants', PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 790, 6 September 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-2022-anti-war-exodus-the-attitudes-and-expectations-of-russian-migrants/>

12 Félix Krawatzek, Isabelle DeSisto and George Soroka, 'Russians in the South Caucasus: Political attitudes and the war in Ukraine', ZOIS Report No. 2/2023, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine>



and friends who remain in Russia. In addition, migrant activists continue to engage with their home country not only through personal contacts but also by developing new communication platforms on social media aimed at a broader audience in Russia. This suggests that Russian dissidents and war-induced migrants who have left may still be able to evade repression and participate in Russian politics and societal issues remotely, at least on a micro level.

**Migrant activists continue to engage with their home country, also by developing new communication platforms on social media.**

The trajectories followed by activists-turned-migrants who continue their political and civic activism abroad are manifold. Some have enough resources and connections to pursue their activities uninterrupted, contributing to journalism and initiatives in the areas of human rights, humanitarian aid and the environment. This smooth transition contrasts with the delayed mobilisation that is more common for activists who had to leave Russia in a hurry and often need some time to clarify their legal status in a new country, deal with bureaucracy, and adapt to new forms of activism in the context of migration. In some cases, migration prompts a change of focus or topic among activists-turned-migrants; they may shift from a specific form of civic activism to political anti-war activism, or from civic education to providing hands-on humanitarian aid to other migrants or Ukrainian refugees. Quite a number of activists feel unable to continue their civic and political activities in a new context or due to burnout. This pattern can be called activism retirement.<sup>13</sup>

Not all migrants had experience of social and political activism prior to leaving the country; for many of them, the migration itself becomes a trigger of this engagement. Those migrants-turned-activists found themselves participating in political actions after migration, e.g. going to street protests, volunteering to help Ukrainian refugees, donating to NGOs and media, etc.

Activities 'before' and 'after' migration can shed light on activism as a dynamic process. In our interviews with migrant activists, it became clear that their modes of engagement and the nature of individual and collective actions are not static but undergo significant shifts in the context of migration.

## Context and cases: Georgia and Germany as host countries

The geographical spread of war-induced migration from Russia is extremely large. In the following section, we look at Georgia and Germany as two different host societies without strictly comparing them. Whereas Germany can be considered a traditional immigration country, Georgia, as a country of outmigration, faces significant challenges in taking in a high number of immigrants from Russia.

<sup>13</sup> More information on the different patterns of activism after migration can be found in the following book: Joanna Fomina. *Political dissent and democratic remittances: The activities of Russian migrants in Europe*. London: Routledge, 2021.

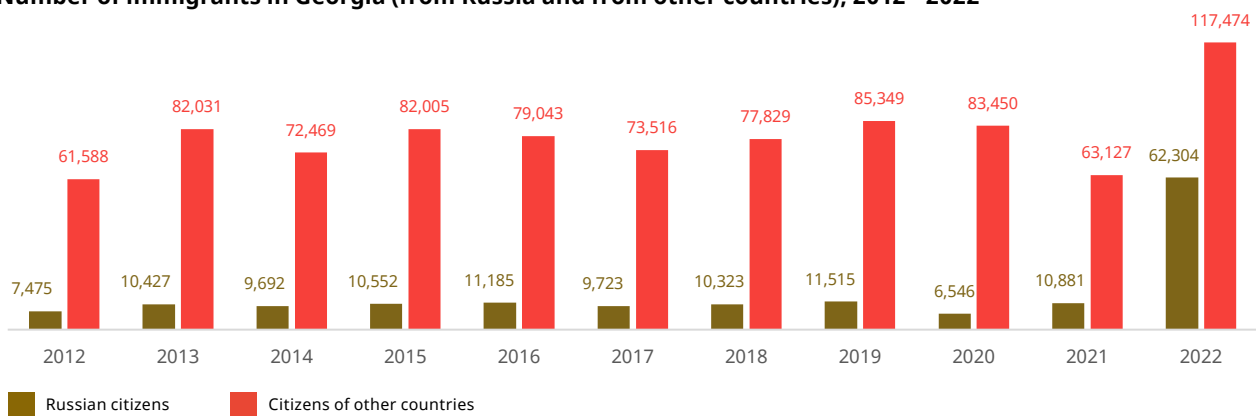
## Georgia

Despite the severing of diplomatic ties with Russia after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, when Georgia lost control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia maintained its military bases there, Georgia continues to pursue a liberal, 'visa-free' migration regime with Russia. This means that Russians, like other foreign citizens, are allowed to enter Georgian territory without restrictions and can stay for up to one year before registering for a visa. For that reason, Georgia remains attractive for Russian citizens, particularly those critical of Putin's regime and those working for international companies. In addition, moderate costs of living and a low level of bureaucracy make arriving and adjusting to life in a new place easier than in Europe. In choosing Georgia as a destination, Russian migrants sought a 'safe haven' but also a temporary shelter where they could 'wait out' the first months of the war or apply for entry documents to other, more desirable countries.<sup>14</sup>

► FIGURES 1 + 2

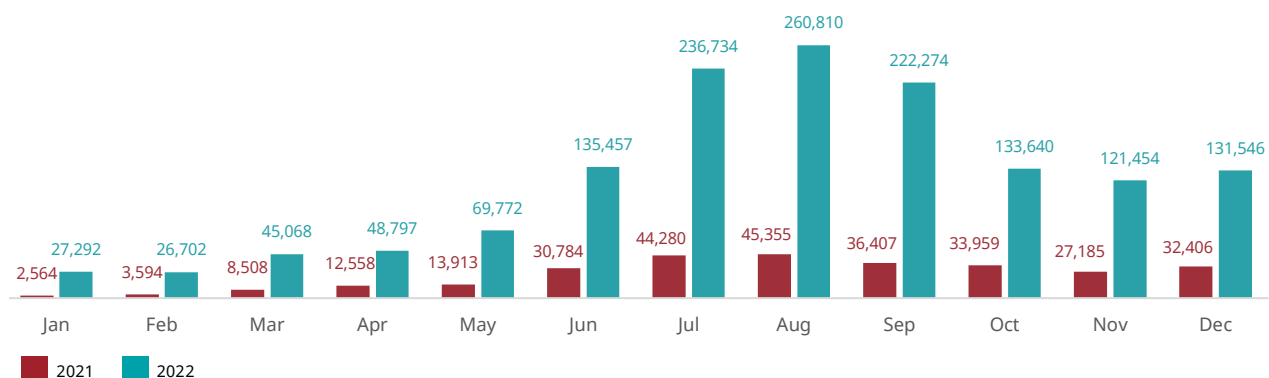
14 <https://outrush.io/eng>

**FIGURE 1**  
Number of immigrants in Georgia (from Russia and from other countries), 2012 – 2022



Source: GEOSTAT, <https://www.geostat.ge/media/53004/Number-of-Population-as-of-January-1%2C-2023.pdf>, <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

**FIGURE 2**  
Number of state border crossings (entries) by Russian citizens, 2021 – 2022



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, <https://info.police.ge/>

At the same time, the country is considered not entirely 'safe' and 'welcoming' for politically engaged migrants from Russia. Some Russian migrants have not found the safety and comfort they were looking for there. Dozens of famous and established Russian activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and lawyers were either not allowed to (re)enter the country after residing there for some time or deported with no legal basis.<sup>15</sup>

With its history of emigration (labour migration, educational migration, brain drain), Georgian society appears unprepared to deal with flows of immigrants and assume a new role as a destination country for migration. Georgia exemplifies a new North-South—or centre-periphery—pattern of migration in Eastern Europe as distinct from the 'traditional' East-West axis. Specific frameworks of the Russian imperial and Soviet past, economic inequality and disparities in income between newcomers and the receiving society have fuelled existing anti-Russian discourses in Georgia. Examining public opinion, Georgian scholars identified long-term risks for national security related to social and economic inequality.<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of people with Russian passports has raised fears and tensions in Georgia, where Russian migrants are strongly associated with the Russian state and its politics. ► **FIGURE 3**

**FIGURE 3**

**Graffiti in Tbilisi**

Dadaena Bar entrance ('Russian warship, fuck off!')



Source: Tsypylma Darieva, December 2022

- 15 Between February and June 2022, more than 3,000 Russian citizens were denied permission to (re)enter the country at the border (airport), Olga Kuzina, "Po inym prichinam". Rossiyanam otказыvayut vo vезde v Gruzii — что об этом известно," Bumaga, 21 February 2023, <https://paperpaper.ru/po-inym-prichinam-rossiyanam-otkazyv/>
- 16 Kornely Kakachia and Salome Kandelaki, "The Russian Migration to Georgia. Threats or Opportunities?", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 817, 19 December 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-russian-migration-to-georgia-threats-or-opportunities/>

## Many activists are unsure about their long-term prospects in Georgia.

According to an International Republican Institute poll from April 2022, Russia is perceived as a threat by 90 per cent of the Georgian population. Memories of the Russian-Georgian war are still vivid and shape interactions between the newcomers and the host society.<sup>17</sup> Many Georgians see the new migrants as embodiments of Russia as an occupying and colonial power without considering their personal and political background. Economic disparities between the newcomers and ordinary Georgian citizens have also fuelled pre-existing anti-Russian discourse. When the numbers of Russians entering the country increased after the partial mobilisation in September 2022, there were calls from the opposition party and the Georgian president Salome Zurbishvili for the introduction of a visa requirement for Russians entering Georgia.<sup>18</sup> The ruling Georgian Dream party did not, however, see the visa-free regime with Russia as a threat to the country's security.

Against this background, Russian migrants are uncertain about how long they will stay in the country. Whereas half of the participants in the OutRush survey consider their 'relocation' to Georgia a temporary exit and plan to move to another country, the other half wants to stay in Georgia for longer.<sup>19</sup> Our interviews confirm that many activists are unsure about their long-term prospects in Georgia. When asked about how long they intended to stay, some respondents answered 'between 2 to 3 years' or 'at least until the end of the war and at most until the end of Putin's presidency in Russia'.

## Germany

Germany has been a destination country for migrants from the former Soviet Union for decades and is now home to a post-Soviet migrant population of approximately 3.5 million.<sup>20</sup> This heterogeneous population includes people with various migration trajectories. The largest subgroups are ethnic Germans from Kazakhstan, Russia, and other former Soviet republics (*russlanddeutsche Spätaussiedler*) and members of their families, whose immigration has traditionally been supported by the Bundesrepublik and peaked in the 1990s. There are also Jewish quota refugees, educational migrants, and labour migrants, including highly skilled professionals, as well as asylum seekers. All of these groups have different levels of access to political rights in German society and various self-perceived levels of integration. Likewise, their subjective sense of belonging to their countries of origin and/or Russia is unevenly distributed.<sup>21</sup> Thus, their potential for mobilisation in relation to democratic changes in Russia and pro- or anti-war activities should not be overestimated and cannot be assessed in this report. Nevertheless, Germany has seen both pro-war/pro-regime and anti-war/pro-democratic initiatives by migrants from previous waves of migration.

17 At the same time, solidarity with Ukraine is remarkably high among the Georgian population, and more than 60,000 Ukrainian refugees were received in Georgia.

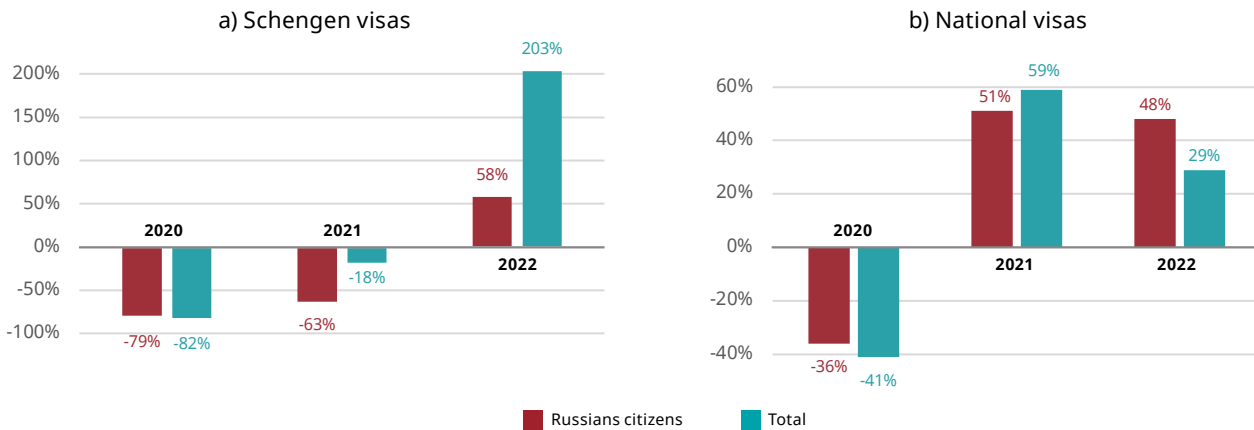
18 'Tbilisi May Change "Liberal" Visa Regime for Russians, Georgian President Says,' RadioFreeEurope, 17 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-russian-visas-change/32088182.html>.

19 Emil Kamalov, Ivetta Sergeeva, Veronika Kostenko and Margarita Zavadskaya, 'Bol'shoj ishod: portret novyh migrantov iz Rossii. Otchet po rezul'tatam oprosa v marte 2022 proekta OutRush,' OutRush, [https://outrush.io/report\\_march\\_2022](https://outrush.io/report_march_2022).

20 This number includes individuals who came to Germany from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union or were born in Germany to at least one parent with such a migration background. Statistisches Bundesamt (2018). *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund – Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus 2017*. Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt.

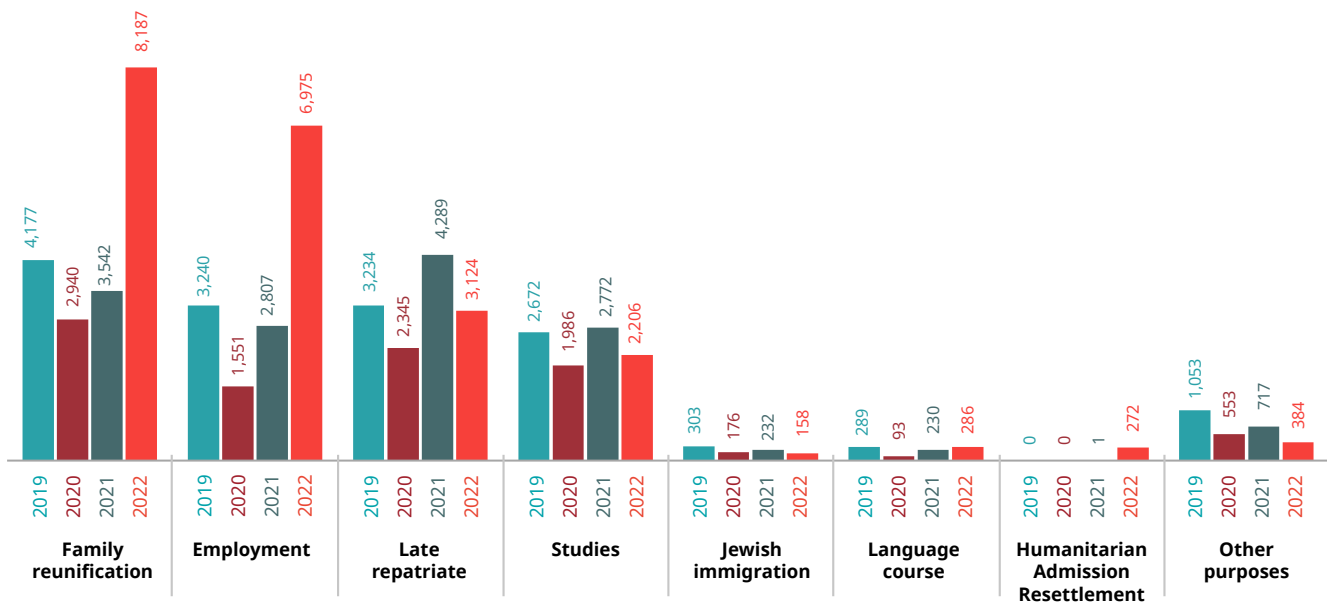
21 Jannis Panagiotidis, *Postsowjetische Migration in Deutschland*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz-Juventa, 2020.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Annual change in number of visas issued to Russian citizens by Germany, 2020 – 2022**



Source: Federal Foreign Office, Statistics on visas issued, 1 June 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/visa-und-aufenthalt/-/2231558>

**FIGURE 5**  
**National visa subtypes issued to Russian citizens in Germany, 2019 – 2022**



Source: Federal Foreign Office, Statistics on visas issued, 1 June 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/visa-und-aufenthalt/-/2231558>

Migration to Germany was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with comprehensive entry bans introduced in 2020. These restrictions have since been gradually lifted, but the changes took effect at different times for different countries of origin. As suggested to us in interviews, the last restrictions in place until mid-2022 made it difficult for Russian nationals including activists and critical scholars to get short-term visas after February 2022. The statistics on visas granted for short stays (“Schengen visas”) and long-term stays (‘national visas D’) confirm this. In 2022, the number of Schengen visas issued to Russian nationals did not grow in proportion to the overall increase in the number of such visas. ► FIGURES 4a + b The opposite is true for entry

We see a specific war-related increase in migration—with Germany serving as a long-term destination.

visas for the purposes of employment and family reunification (subtypes of national visa D): there were significant increases in the number of these visas issued to Russian nationals in 2022, well above the growth in these visas in general. The rise in employment visas indicates that Russian nationals of working age came to Germany for longer stays in higher numbers, so we see a specific war-related increase in migration—with Germany serving not as a transit or an ‘exit gate’ country, but more as a long-term destination.

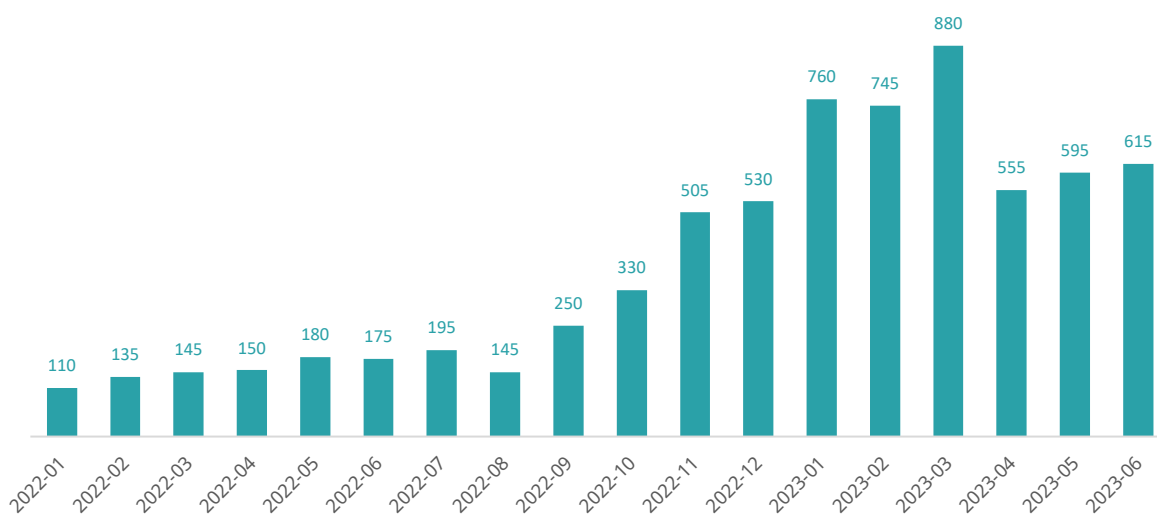
► FIGURE 5

After Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine, large numbers of Ukrainians sought protection in Germany, thus changing the composition of migrant communities from the former Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> Russian nationals still had various ways of entering Germany (as students, as asylum seekers, with tourist and other visas, etc.). The number of first-time asylum applicants from Russia rose significantly, especially in the first months after the partial mobilisation was declared. ► FIGURE 6 Overall numbers for 2022 were higher than previously (2,850 in 2022, compared to 1,440 in 2021, Source: EUROSTAT). This trend has continued: in the first six months of 2023 there were more first-time applications than in the whole of the previous year.

A new option for entering Germany and acquiring long-term residence status deserves special mention: at the end of May 2022, Germany introduced a specific procedure for those who are considered to be particularly at risk of

FIGURE 6

Number of first-time asylum applications by Russian citizens in Germany, 2022 – 2023



Source: EUROSTAT, variable “migr\_asyappctzm,” monthly data [[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/view/MIGR\\_ASYAPPCTZM](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZM)]

22 For Ukrainians fleeing the war, the European humanitarian solution was agreed very quickly and implemented in Germany via Section 24 of the Residence Act (protective status of war refugees).



political persecution by the Russian regime for their anti-war engagement. This includes human rights defenders; employees or partners of organisations classified in Russia as undesirable organisations or foreign agents; oppositional activists; critical journalists; and scholars who criticised the war;—if they are at risk of repression and can demonstrate relations to Germany. The regulation is based on Section 22 Sentence 2 of the Residence Act. An application can only be made while staying in Russia or in a third country, and successful applicants come to Germany with a humanitarian visa, which is subsequently converted into a residence permit that guarantees social rights. To sum up, while Germany did not witness a huge wave of migration from Russia in 2022, it offered special entry options for certain groups, partly due to long-standing connections between the civil societies in Russia and Germany.

## Multiple audiences of activism

### Audiences in Russia

We identified two focal points of homeland-oriented migrant activism in both Georgia and Germany. On the one hand, activist migrants and journalists continue to produce and disseminate independent information via social media channels with content related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and corruption and inequalities in Russia. On the other hand, they create and support infrastructures which make it possible to provide financial and moral support to civil society actors who remain in Russia, in particular political prisoners, activists targeted with other forms of repression, critical scholars and students, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other oppositional actors. This activism extends to providing help with legal issues, psychological support, and practical tools to exit and adjust in a new place for those individuals and their families who are critical of the political regime in Russia and want or have to leave.

‘Of course, if we were in Russia, we would probably have more influence, but nevertheless, it seems to me that everything we do should be to keep on discussing important democratic values. So that people don't drop this thread of values. We don't drop our hands. [...] We unite, we help, and we educate; we continue to talk about those values that we consider important, i.e. freedom of speech, freedom of the media, the importance of grassroots organisation, horizontal categories, and informal education, i.e. [...] we continue to support.

*(Katerina Kiltau, Emigration for Action, Tbilisi, December 2022)*

### Georgia

In Georgia, a network of activists is engaged in resisting official Russian propaganda. For example, the Free Russia Foundation in Tbilisi is developing long-term strategies to counter Russian state propaganda by offering alternative media content and free online courses to professionalise grassroots initiatives and individual activists in Russia. One interviewee emphasised that the main aim of this work is to reach an online audience in Russia, especially Russian citizens who are pro-Putin and pro-war.



‘You probably can’t change people’s minds, the people whom we call vatniks [vatnik is a Russian term used to describe supporters of the Kremlin’s propaganda], but you can always plant a seed of doubt by starting a discussion, right? I think if someday people have the right to choose, they can choose for themselves, and sooner or later they’ll choose another source of information. Not immediately. Some may not accept that channel right away.

*(Nina Alexa, Free Russia Foundation, Tbilisi, December 2022)*

In another example of social and political engagement directed at the home country, the new migrants are trying to stay connected with different grassroots voices in Russia. Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) is a growing transnational young women’s initiative that targets different audiences in Russia. It was founded in February 2022 as a spontaneous initiative of feminist networks opposed to the war. FAR provides psychological help and legal assistance to those experiencing political oppression in Russia. With nearly 40,000 followers, its Telegram channel provides a horizontal platform for critical voices against state propaganda and a forum for local protest actions by women in Russia. Its organisational structure comprising numerous autonomous but interconnected cells is remarkable.<sup>23</sup> The FAR network deliberately tries to reach out to different peripheral regions in the Russian Federation.

‘I talk to activists from Russia every day [...] they write: ‘A cop came by in the morning, what should we do?’ We monitor and manage other people’s security—that’s what we do now. Plus we support the protests that arise on the ground because we have the resources to make them beautiful, loud, effective, and visible, since we have been doing this for many years. We work within Russia in a variety of cities, underground. [...] We do anti-war campaigns and organise closed events [...] above all in the regions.

*(Daria Serenko, Feminist Anti-War Resistance, Tbilisi, December 2022)*

Many cells are well informed about the other cells’ activities and exchange information regularly. Nevertheless, local cells remain autonomous and make decisions independently of other units at the local level. Since May 2022, FAR has been publishing the samizdat newspaper *Zhenskaya Pravda* (Women’s Truth), printed copies of which are distributed in the Russian regions by activists and volunteers. ► **FIGURE 7** With this newspaper, FAR bypasses the tightened war censorship and particularly wants to reach women and their families who are not interested in politics. The activists do not believe in coordination ‘from above’ but instead rely on transparency and open horizontal communication.

<sup>23</sup> See in: *Baltic Worlds*, Issue 1 – 2 (2023), <https://balticworlds.com/back-issues/>

FIGURE 7  
 Newspaper *Zhenskaya Pravda* (Women's Truth)  
 'Mobilisation or Life'



Source: Feminist Anti-War Resistance, <https://t.me/femagainstar>, January 2023

## Germany

As in Georgia, providing support to activists, human rights defenders, critical journalists, and other people in Russia who are opposed to the regime and the war has emerged as a major field of transnational engagement for migrant activists in Germany. This practical solidarity takes different forms, from organising free psychological counselling to anti-repression work, for example assisting persecuted individuals by crowdfunding to help them pay their fines for anti-war statements.<sup>24</sup> The solidarity networks in which this happens are not just bilateral—between activists in Russia and another country—but due to complex migration patterns, they extend across several countries. This presents specific challenges to activists abroad, not least in relation to secure communication channels:<sup>25</sup>

24 These can run to several thousand euros, an impossibly high amount for most people in the Russian periphery.

25 See: Darren Loucaides, 'The Kremlin Has Entered the Chat,' Wired, 2 February 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat/>.

‘Well, you have to use options that are not always the most convenient [...] But some education of people about communication security and the importance of it all happens for sure. The human factor cannot be excluded, someone might fuck up somewhere, [...] but in principle, the skills and the awareness that safety should not be traded for convenience, that seems to become sort of self-evident, though probably not for everyone.

*(Andrey,<sup>26</sup> an initiative supporting activists in Russia, Berlin, May 2023)*

Municipal deputies (*mundepy*) are a subgroup of new political migrants in Germany who typically continue to carry out the constituency work they did in Russia. In the context of increasing authoritarian control over higher-level elections, municipal elections, especially in St. Petersburg and Moscow, became a niche for oppositional and democratic activists pursuing ‘politics from below’. After the beginning of the full-scale war and anti-war and regime-critical statements by democratic *mundepy*,<sup>27</sup> the state pressure on them intensified. Working on the everyday problems of constituents is still possible from abroad and even desirable. Moreover, as one of our interviewees emphasised, parts of the active electorate who stayed in Russia do not interpret the migration of their deputies as ‘running away’ but rather as their chance to retain an indirect anti-war ‘voice through exit’:

‘[They told me] It’s a good thing you went away; you’ll be able to disseminate our opinions at these events because there’s a lot of nonsense going on at these anti-war events, like the Free Russia Forum and Ilya Ponomarev’s congress. There is a lot of nonsense going on there, we don’t like it, but nobody hears our voice there, and you could probably represent it.

*(Vitaliy Bovar, municipal deputy from St. Petersburg, Bremen, June 2023)*

Several initiatives/organisations that emerged (e.g. inTransit) or broadened their profile (e.g. Solidarus e.V.) after February 2022 have been collaborating transnationally with other initiatives and activists to help people at risk of political persecution to leave Russia and, in some cases, come to Germany. They were involved in the process of implementing the new policy on humanitarian visas under Section 22 Sentence 2 of the Residence Act (see next section on host country audiences). The information they provided on eligibility and the procedures involved in getting a humanitarian visa or alternatives proved invaluable for activist networks in Russia and it was flanked by targeted support for activists at risk.

‘We have a closed chatroom with a lot of useful information for our relocating people, all kinds of memos, examples of visa application forms and so on and so forth, so we began assisting people during the relocation phase itself.

*(Julia, LGBTQ+ activist, Berlin, November 2022)*

26 Here and in other cases where only a first name is given, the names of our interviewees have been changed.

27 The most prominent example are probably a petition and a proposal to State Duma calling for Putin’s impeachment:

Anna Pavlova, ‘Chtoby frazu “Putina v otstavku” uvideli kak mozno bol’she zhitelej strany.’ *MundePy iz Peterburga prizvali k impichmentu prezidenta — i vot chto iz jetogo vyshlo,* Media-Zona, 17 September 2022, <https://zona.media/article/2022/09/17/mo-smolninskoye>

FIGURE 8

Rally on 24 February 2023, the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: 'Victory for Ukraine – Peace for Europe – Democracy for Russia', organised by Demokrati-JA

('Freedom For Political Prisoners!' / 'Stop Putin! Stop War!')



Source: Tatiana Golova

The exit of politically motivated activists does not mean that they are completely outside the home country's political sphere. The study of migrants' engagement with the home country points to the importance of maintaining long-distance links with the society in Russia, in particular with grassroots initiatives, individuals, friends and relatives. In particular, this helps to sustain horizontal connections between exiled activists and ordinary Russian citizens in different cities and peripheral regions. For many activist migrants in Georgia and Germany, emigration allows them to continue their activities and transfer their political principles and practices across borders. For others, critical events like the war have seen them adopt a transnational identity and widen their scope of action. ► [FIGURE 8](#)

For many activist migrants in Georgia and Germany, emigration allows them to continue their activities and transfer their political principles across borders.

### Host society as audience and non-audience

The relationship of Russian migrant activists to their potential audiences in their respective host countries varies widely. Whereas Russian migrants in Georgia often avoid direct interactions with the Georgian audience, those in Germany often cooperate with German institutions as a way of realising their goals.

#### Georgia

According to a Georgian migration expert, local authorities do not expect either new migrants from Russia or Ukrainian refugees to stay in the country for long. For that reason, they have been slow to adapt the country's

migration regulation regime and develop an integration policy for newcomers. According to a policy analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) in Tbilisi, the Georgian government's strategy on Russian migrants is 'vague'.

Many Russian migrants in Georgia also see their 'relocation' to Georgia as temporary, but they are unclear about how long they will stay before moving back to Russia or to another country. According to our observations, few Russian migrants learn Georgian and have social ties to Georgian society. Many have a good command of English and prefer to communicate with the locals in that language. The migrant activists we interviewed try to avoid speaking Russian in public because they know that their presence as Russians in Tbilisi may be viewed critically and they themselves associated with Russian imperial behaviour. Many of them are conscious that the latest migration wave from Russia has triggered strong emotions among Georgians, including fears of a renewed confrontation with Russia.

Russian migrants rarely view Georgians as a potential audience for their activism.

Some Georgian experts have accused Russian migrants of not being vocal enough about their attitudes to the Russian government. When asked about the extent to which their collective actions and public anti-war protests in central Tbilisi have been noticed by locals, some activists say that that is not their intention. Indeed, Russian migrants rarely view Georgians as a potential audience for their activism and they are currently reluctant to collaborate with the ruling party, the opposition or local civil society.

‘We held all our rallies at the Ukrainian embassy or the Interests Section.<sup>28</sup> We are against the idea of holding a rally in front of the Parliament in Tbilisi, because that means that you're asking the Parliament for something, you're asking Georgia for something—they see it that way. Sorry, but what can we ask them for? These people gave us the opportunity to live here, so it would be wrong to stand in front of the Parliament and declare 'No to the War!' or 'Free Alexei Navalny!'

*(Anton Mikhailchuk, Free Russia Foundation, Georgia, December 2022)*

These concerns may be due to the fact that politically engaged Russian migrants have had little contact with Georgian society and its civil society organisations. The Georgian discourse on visa restrictions and the sometimes hostile attitude of the receiving society towards newcomers may limit the scope of these migrants' social engagement and networks in the future. Some activists expressed the feeling of not having the right to claim anything from the Georgian government:

‘Well, Georgia has its own opposition, Georgia has its own political problems, and I, for example, as a visitor, I do not feel comfortable interacting with this community because I do not know the context; I have not lived in Georgia, I have nothing to do with it... Therefore, I did not feel comfortable at the rally that took place for Georgia's European integration.

*(Varvara, independent migrants' media, Tbilisi, June 2022)*

28 Russian Federation Interests Section at the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia.



## Germany

Russian migrant initiatives in Germany engage far more actively with local audiences and have more diverse interactions with local civil society and political actors. There are various reasons for that, including the previous history of German-Russian civil society cooperation and institutional support for Russian civil society, which has recently been extended to activists in exile. The 'humanitarian visa' option recently opened to dissidents from Russia is linked to certain expectations. Firstly, critics of the Russian regime are expected to continue their activities from Germany, for instance, in critical media projects addressing Russian audiences.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Russian journalists run the risk of staying in their 'echo chamber', isolated from the mainstream German media:

‘There will be a big, serious disaster after a while because there is a certain impression that the German media needs Russian-speaking journalists. They don't. There is nothing. Only *Bild* managed to create some sort of editorial office, a Russian-language channel [...] and that's it. All six or seven newspapers said they were going to have Russian-language desks. Where are they?

*(Alexey Kozlov, Solidarus e. V., January 2023)*

Secondly, they are expected to address members of the more established Russian-speaking communities in order to counteract their (partly real, partly assumed) support for Putin and identification with the current Russian regime.

‘They [some native Germans] approached me and said ‘Alexey, you must fight the propaganda here in Germany, we can help you with a camera and anything else you need.’ They would like to help. We are discussing possible formats because they have many ethnic German resettlers in their social circles who have lived here for a while and started talking bullshit that it's Ukraine's own fault.

*(Alexey Schwarz, former coordinator of a regional Navalny's office, Germany, August 2022)*

Russian activists have their own expectations vis-à-vis German politics and make concrete demands, calling for a clear distancing from the Russian state and support for Ukraine. In general, the regime critics value the freedom of assembly and other opportunities for political engagement here:

‘I came to realise that politics in Germany is, for the most part, filled with people who came there to work and with a desire to make the world a better place. It was a huge revelation to me, and I honestly didn't expect that, it was so inspiring. I realised that just by bringing information, input of some kind, and retelling what is happening on the ground, people react, and they get in touch, and working groups are formed, and something changes.

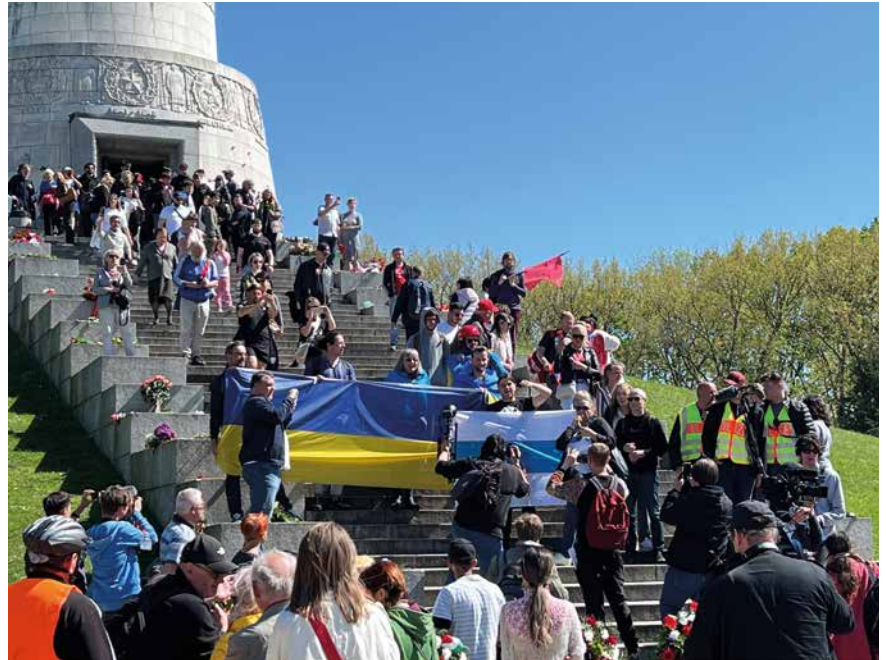
*(Julia, LGBTQ+ activist, Berlin, November 2022)*

<sup>29</sup> Federal Press Conference, Berlin, 30.05.2022.

FIGURE 9

**In Treptower Park (Berlin) on 9 May 2023**

A group of pro-Ukrainian activists peacefully disrupts the Victory Day celebrations, mostly attended by Russian speakers; the militarised narratives of Soviet victory in WWII became central for legitimising Russia's war against Ukraine.



Source: Tatiana Golova

However, this basic trust in state institutions is occasionally shaken by conflicts. For instance, during commemorations to mark the end of the Second World War in Europe on 8 and 9 May 2022 in Berlin, the authorities severely curbed the use of both Russian and Ukrainian symbols in 'historically relevant' areas.<sup>30</sup> This strategy to protect public order and avoid conflicts between migrant groups prevented the strong demonstration of support for Ukraine that various groups, among them the Russian migrants' initiative Demokrati-JA, had called for. To the disappointment and anger of many activists, the authorities de facto equated the symbols of the aggressor state Russia with those of Ukraine in this case. ► FIGURE 9

Anti-war activists from Russia are reluctant to collaborate with the German peace movement. They criticised the organisers of the mass demonstrations in the winter and spring of 2022 for failing to adopt the Ukrainian demand to 'Close the sky' and for not giving enough prominence to the Ukrainians themselves. Since then, the peace movement has been increasingly dominated by anti-NATO voices and demands for Germany to 'stay out of it' and not provide Ukraine with heavy weaponry, and for the war to be stopped immediately without insisting that Russian troops withdraw from Ukraine.

30 It initially happened in 2023 as well, see the press release by the 'Reclaiming Remembrance' initiative 'Statement on the planned ban on Ukrainian flags & the threat of censorship of differentiated, contemporary commemoration' (See more: <https://www.facebook.com/102419902036813/posts/556849886593810/?app=fbi>).



These discourses recall the rhetoric of the Kremlin, which frames the war as a legitimate defence of Russia's interests against NATO, a framing that has been sharply criticised by anti-war activists from Russia. ► **FIGURE 10**

Activists and initiatives that provide Russian citizens with advice and concrete assistance in leaving Russia often contact state institutions in Germany with their concerns. The beneficiaries are, first and foremost, people in Russia threatened with repression due to their open opposition to the regime and the war. In some cases, the aim is to enable people who are already in a visa-free country (such as Georgia) to enter Germany.

One of the activists' tasks here is to verify specific cases and to demonstrate to the German authorities (e.g. the Foreign Ministry) that the requirements for granting a humanitarian visa according to Section 22 Sentence 2 of the Residence Act are fulfilled. They contribute their knowledge of the situation in Russia, their personal migration experiences, and the social capital of their networks in Russia, thus acting as intermediaries between German networks and institutions and actors in Russia. During the verification process, they frame the cases, verifying through open sources and information provided by lawyers, NGOs and activist networks that the criteria of 'risk of persecution' and 'ties to Germany' are fulfilled. As argued by one of our interviewees, the humanitarian visas are for those who have systematically worked against the regime and the war and collaborated with German organisations, so some people at risk of persecution might not fit the criteria; this calls for a more precise definition of the requirements.

#### FIGURE 10

##### **Anti-war rally on 21 September 2022**

The day the partial mobilisation in Russia was announced



Source: Tatiana Golova

‘It’s not really visas for people facing persecution. Because the majority of people facing persecution, before they go out with a picket somewhere on the street in, for instance, Nizhny Novgorod, they did not bother to contact German partners and somehow arrange cooperation with German partners in general. And they are at risk. And yet German politicians continue to spread the idea that humanitarian visas are for people facing persecution.

*(Anna, inTransit, December 2022)*

Initiatives like Solidarus have been helping activists at risk and political migrants for a long time, while others like inTransit have only recently been established or become politicised. At the start of the full-scale invasion, several activists joined forces with other actors including transnationally operating NGOs (Amnesty International, Austausch e.V., Reporters Without Borders, etc.) to lobby for an institutionalised solution for granting protection status to Russian dissidents.

‘Our tactic was to approach politicians or NGOs here, those who have long had close ties with the Foreign Ministry, and offer them, on the one hand, our assistance with verification of cases and, on the other hand, to let them know that we have lists of people who need urgent help and they are verified.

*(Anna, inTransit, December 2022)*

This kind of activism is directed at different target groups. In addition to their time-consuming work on concrete cases, the activist migrants disseminate information about the rather new procedure for granting humanitarian visas and comparable entry options not only to activists in Russia but also to German and European politicians and migration experts.

## Migrants as an audience

In both countries, migrant activists from Russia also address other migrants, including ‘relokanty’ (relocated people) and ‘expats’ from the most recent wave of emigration as well as representatives of earlier waves of post-Soviet migration and Russian-speaking diasporas.

### Germany

Given Germany’s decades-long history of immigration from countries of the former Soviet Union, initiatives founded by ‘established’ migrants play a prominent role in recent pro-democratic activism by the Russian-speaking community. After Alexey Navalny’s arrest in January 2021, several new initiatives emerged and networking among the initiatives intensified. With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the new migration wave, the (trans)national self-organisation and networking of initiatives and activists who perceive themselves as ‘anti-war’ and ‘pro-democracy’ gained a new momentum.

‘One year before 24 February, in January 2021, when this wave of protests began, some volunteers got together, and we decided to come up with a joint initiative and then we wrote letters to political prisoners, told their stories, and generally aimed to meet Russians with pro-European, pro-democracy views. [...] Actually, we were doing that for a year, and

then after 24 February it became obvious that if you don't go out and do something now, it's not clear who else will.

*(Valentina, Demokrati-JA, Berlin, August 2022)*

Some initiatives in Germany see new migrants from Russia as one of their key audiences. Work with them takes different forms and has different objectives. The migrant community—before and after 24 February 2022—provides support networks and information to people who plan to leave Russia or have already done so. Many activists and organisations see their goals as integration, community building, and the integration of newcomers into the diaspora. Community building happens on online platforms like Telegram and in face-to-face meetings. In the changing legal landscape with regard to visas and residence permits, NGOs and civic initiatives provide orientation to newcomers in workshops and talks about settling and organising their lives in Germany.<sup>31</sup> Anti-war picnics organised by Demokrati-JA in the spring and summer of 2022 were devoted to giving practical assistance, building connections and, at the same time, representing the group's political position and values:

‘Because on an everyday level, many people have questions about finding accommodation, finding a job, registration, obtaining benefits, certain legal issues, transporting pets, and so on. These are informal consultations but in a relaxed atmosphere with music, which could be called protest music, but it is mainly just Ukrainian music, in Ukrainian, in Belarusian.

*(Valentina, Demokrati-JA, Berlin, August 2022)*

Supporting the newcomers is considered by activists among the ‘older’ migrant communities as a way of consolidating the pro-democratic Russian diaspora.

‘Our main goal is to create a well-organised diaspora, mostly or specifically from Russia. Because we know that as long as Putin exists, political migrants will come to us. And we would like them not to be alone, but to have us here, people who have been living here for a long time, who know how life in Germany is in general and can help them to adapt.

*(Ekaterina, Freies Russland NRW e. V./ Feminist Anti-War Resistance, Germany, January 2023)*

While community building is viewed as an inclusive project, disparities and inequalities in terms of social and cultural capital between activists who have lived in Germany longer and newer political migrants make cooperation and integration into existing initiatives challenging. It has also proved difficult to mobilise less-politicised new migrants for some forms of activism, such as street actions. Differences have also emerged between various kinds of activists: grassroots activists and exiled politicians sometimes have different ideas about the reasons for the war, the responsibility of Russians, and appropriate forms of opposition in emigration.

Emotional, or care work is also seen as an important field of activity given the emotional turmoil, multiple challenges and generalised uncertainty faced by migrant activists—especially war-induced migrants. As one

<sup>31</sup> See ‘Bumazhka Day’ (‘Paperwork Day’) organised by the Freies Russland Berlin at the Reform Space, where newly arrived migrants can get assistance in dealing with bureaucratic questions.

activist involved in supporting people still in Russia says about peer-to-peer practices of 'survival support' within his transnational network:

‘And sometimes helping ourselves in the sense of not falling apart as a collective is just as important, to some degree, as the help we give when we receive applications from someone who has suicidal thoughts, who has a fine of a hundred thousand [roubles], who can't leave the country, people we don't know personally. To be able to work with them continuously, we need to have some kind of working environment ourselves.

*(Andrey, an initiative supporting activists in Russia, Berlin, May 2023)*

Activist migrants often see a political obligation to act and a moral obligation to express their solidarity with dissenters who have stayed in Russia.

The idea that political and civic activities should be continued after leaving Russia from a place of (relative) safety is expressed in several interviews. As exemplified by the following quote, activist migrants often see a political obligation to act and a moral obligation to express their solidarity with activists and dissenters who have stayed in Russia:

‘Our main task here is, among other things, to make sure that people remain at least somewhat active. Because what exactly is the approach of Putin regime? Either you stop doing what we think is wrong or you leave. And if a person leaves and still stops doing what Putin's regime considers wrong and does not start anything else, then the regime wins.

*(Alexey Kozlov, Solidarus e. V., Berlin, January 2023)*

New political migrants who came to Germany with humanitarian visas face multiple challenges which make their political and civic integration more difficult. Those who are dependent on the German state often found themselves distributed to small settlements with no relevant political communities. Their mobility is restricted by social transfer regulations and financial limitations, which hinder transregional networking and street actions. The requirement to integrate into German society complicates their political work towards Russia to a certain extent.

Some pro-democratic Russian migrants address other migrant milieus whom they see as profoundly apolitical or pro-Putin—first and foremost connected to ethnic German resettlers from countries of the former Soviet Union (*russlanddeutsche Spätaussiedler*). While such generalisations are not feasible and there are also representatives of 'old' migration waves among anti-war activists, there are indeed networks of Russian-speaking migrants in Germany who support the Kremlin and the war (albeit not exclusively controlled from Russia). Their pro-war motor rallies in North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin in spring 2022 were met with protests by local communities and Ukrainian and Russian migrants. There, and particularly at later events to commemorate the end of the Second World War in Europe on Victory Day, the previous 'parallel play' of 'pro-democratic' and 'pro-Putin' migrant networks was replaced by conflictual interactions in public spaces:

‘I saw the motor rally on 8 May; because we were staging a counter-protest, we stood in a chain of solitary pickets along the route of the motor rally. But the police regarded us as a threat, and divided the rally into many parts. So, on the one hand, it was also a victory for us. This rally didn't go through Cologne in one convoy, but was split up into small columns and led along different routes [...]. They [rally participants] were going to the cemetery to lay flowers for the victims of repressions, of

the *Zwangsarbeit* [forced labour in Nazi Germany]. But we found them anyway; we saw parts of the convoy. And we showed them our posters.

(Ekaterina, *Freies Russland NRW e. V./ Feminist Anti-War Resistance, Germany, January 2023*)

## Georgia

Like their counterparts in Germany, politically engaged Russian migrants in Georgia are preoccupied with the question of how to mobilise Russian *relocant* for political and social activism and, on this basis, build lasting communities. Their goal is to counteract the social and political fragmentation of the newcomers and to spread democratic attitudes and practices of political engagement among those migrants who were previously rather apolitical. At the same time, there is a desire to promote an image of Russians in the public perception as people engaged in anti-war activities.

Various migrant initiatives work with newly arrived Russians in Georgia, whom they help and support by (1) providing information about life in Georgia; (2) developing chats and other community-building tools; (3) assisting with the search for accommodation; (4) creating integration spaces (e.g. co-working spaces, places for lectures and public discussions, bars, bookshops); (5) providing psychological support; and (6) organising excursions and events for the purpose of integration. After the announcement of a partial mobilisation in September 2022, some activists who had moved to Georgia in February and March 2022 temporarily shifted their focus to helping Russians stuck on the Russian-Georgian border. ► FIGURE 11

In the meantime, new fields of civic engagement and volunteering have emerged. Examples include the branches of the Free Russia Foundation and Kovcheg in Tbilisi, which provide shelter and support to dissidents and politically persecuted journalists from Russia. These initiatives provide on-site and online spaces where know-how can be exchanged and activities in Georgia can be coordinated and communicated to the public.

‘Another thing we do is community building; we try to unite people who came here, let them know each other, create some new projects. For example, since the beginning of the war, we have held about ten public rallies here in Georgia [...]. Our last rally was on November 24th [2022]; about five hundred Russians came, and we unite them, we show that there are many people who are against the war.

(Anton Mikhailchuk, *Free Russia Foundation, Georgia, December 2022*)

The informal social spaces where practical assistance is provided are important because they strengthen mutual trust between different segments of the migrant population. Apart from the humanitarian dimension, this is intended to make activists more visible as a force against the Kremlin regime. Strengthening the civil and political engagement of fellow migrants is, however, a long-term task. Most Russians who have come to Georgia on recent migration waves share similar experiences of everyday life in the host country, and, as surveys,<sup>32</sup> show, many of them hold democratic values.

32 Félix Krawatzek, Isabelle DeSisto and George Soroka, ‘Russians in the South Caucasus: Political attitudes and the war in Ukraine’, ZOIS Report No. 2/2023, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine>; <https://outrush.io/eng>



FIGURE 11

## 'Georgia: Information and Support'

Emigration for Action's flyer for newcomers, October 2022

## Грузия: информация и помощь

EMIGRATION FOR ACTION

Здравствуйте!  
Скорее всего, вы оказались в Грузии в это непростое время из-за войны в Украине и объявления мобилизации. Мы — **Emigration for Action**, проект помощи украинским беженцам в Грузии от российской эмиграции, деятельно выступающей против войны. 6 месяцев мы закупаем медикаменты для украинских беженцев в Грузии, проводим просветительские и благотворительные мероприятия в их поддержку. Мы последовательно выступаем против войны и считаем важным поддержать тех, кто был вынужден покинуть страну из-за угрозы мобилизации и несогласия с происходящим.

Мы подготовили для вас большой гайд с базовой информацией по Грузии:

t.ly/zPpd

**Где обменять наличные:**

- у метро Марджанишвили
- у метро Авлабари (в сторону рынка)
- у Galleria Tbilisi (курс хуже, но быстро и удобно)

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---

Секция интересов России (заменяет посольство)  
пр-т Ильи Чавчавадзе, 51  
(032 291 26 75)

**Важно помнить!** Российская Федерация участвовала в двух войнах на территории Грузии: в 1992 году (Абхазия) и в 2008 году (Самачабло / Южная Осетия).  
**Грузины вспоминают эти войны с большим горем**, поскольку тогда погибло много человек, а ещё больше людей вынуждены были стать беженцами. Сейчас территории оккупированы Россией — а это 20% площади Грузии. Въезд в эти регионы считается преступлением, максимальное наказание — 6 лет тюрьмы.  
Относитесь с уважением к гражданам страны, которая вас приняла.

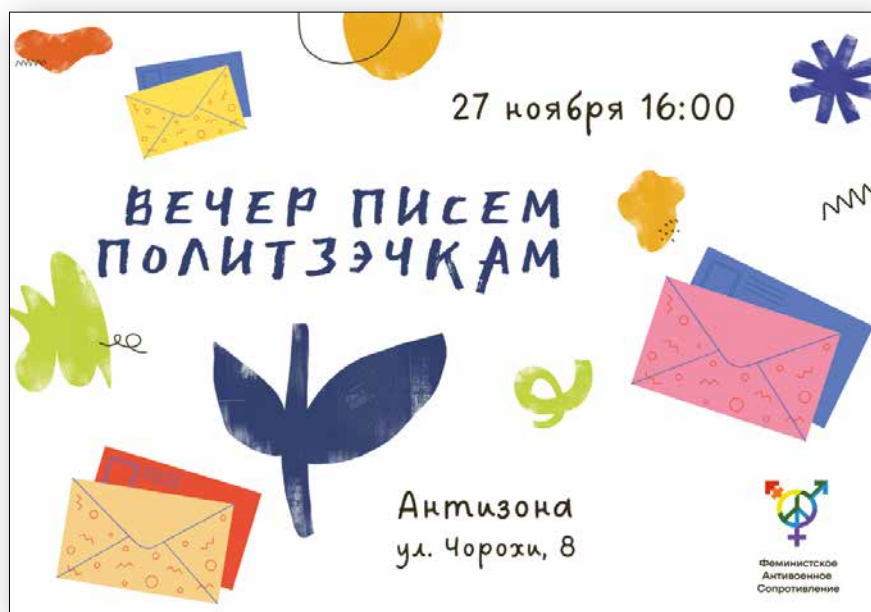
Source: Tsyplina Darieva, Tbilisi, December 2022

However, shared experiences are often not enough to promote an effective mobilisation. Thus, up to now only a minority of Russian migrants in Georgia is politically active and participates in collective public protest actions in cities like Tbilisi and Batumi. ► FIGURE 12

To sum up, in both Germany and Georgia activists share a common goal of supporting newcomers from Russia, community building, and establishing networks for civic and political engagement on-site and transnationally. The more complex structure of the Russian-speaking migrant population in Germany has a significant impact on these activities and on migrants' civic and political engagement in general.

FIGURE 12

'Evening for Writing Letters to female political prisoners' in Antizona, Tbilisi



Source: <https://t.me/antizon>, November 2022

## Ukrainians as an audience

### Germany

In Germany, Russian activist migrants collaborated intensively with migrants from Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union and with people without a migration background to provide different kinds of humanitarian assistance to Ukrainians—in Ukraine and in Germany. Migrants from Ukraine, who have been living in Germany for a long time, including representatives of the ethnic German minority from Ukraine, play a special role in these efforts; they are highly motivated, have the necessary cultural and other resources, as well as well-developed transnational networks.<sup>33</sup>

The war has accelerated a process of political and identity differentiation among 'post-Soviet' migrants in Germany, with diaspora communities becoming increasingly more distinct from each other. While some migrant groups are engaged in providing humanitarian relief and political support for Ukraine, others express their support for Putin's Russia on social media or at public events, most prominently the Victory Day commemorations.

Migrants who identify as Russian and pro-democracy face a challenge when they address different audiences simultaneously with their anti-war initiatives. It is important for them to position themselves as people from Russia who are against the current regime, to mobilise other migrants from Russia, to show solidarity with like-minded people in Russia, and to demonstrate to

33 Kostiantyn Fedorenko, 'Ukrainian Activists in Germany: Feeling Positive Despite Daily Challenges,' ZOIS, ZOIS Spotlight 8/2023, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/ukrainian-activists-in-germany-feeling-positive-despite-daily-challenges>.



FIGURE 13

March against Russian imperialism on 13 November 2023, organised by independent female activists and supported by Feminist Antiwar Resistance and Demokrati-JA:

a) 'Empires have different beginnings but the same end'



b) 'Peace for Ukraine, Freedom for Russia' / '(Putin) Scumbag'



Source: Tatiana Golova

an international audience that there are Russians who are against the war. Yet, this can be a barrier to cooperation with some Ukrainian diaspora initiatives that refuse to deal with actors who position themselves as Russian (for example, by showing the 'white-blue-white' flag of the Russian anti-war movement during events) in view of the brutal Russian war against Ukraine, the wider Russian imperial tradition, and the reproduction of the 'colonial gaze' by parts of the Russian opposition in exile. Russian migrant activists are thus confronted with the challenge of managing their (in)visibility:

‘It is because of Bucha and these war crimes of the Russian army in Ukraine. And the more of these terrible news stories, the worse the relations [between Russians and Ukrainians in Germany] have become. Unfortunately, yes. Therefore, to imagine that we will be able to organise a rally with the Ukrainian diaspora... it's just that the chances of it are minimal. [...] And then, for example, when we do participate in some rally [by Ukrainian activists] and we are also present there, there is also the Georgian diaspora, the Belarusian diaspora. So the Belarusian and Georgian diasporas are mentioned there, but we are not. So it's as if we are not there.

(Ekaterina, *Freies Russland NRW e. V./ Feminist Anti-War Resistance, Germany, January 2023*)

Unlike politics, humanitarian relief remains an area where cooperation with Ukrainians is rather unproblematic. The decolonial discourse and solidarity between Ukrainian activists and activists representing ethnic minorities in Russia could be fertile ground for further cooperation. ► FIGURES 13 a + b

## Georgia

Georgia has so far taken in about 60,000 Ukrainian refugees, mostly from eastern Ukraine and the territories occupied by Russia. However, it does not grant them refugee status with the associated benefits. Refugees from Ukraine receive only modest financial support in Georgia, including free accommodation in hotels (until August 2022). They have no entitlements to emergency accommodation, or medical or psychological care.

In cooperation with local volunteers, Russian activists are trying to improve the situation of Ukrainians in Georgia. They have set up several grassroots projects devoted to helping Ukrainian refugees. For example, the humanitarian aid initiative 'Emigration for Action' was founded in Tbilisi in March 2022 and has since been organising fundraising campaigns and events. Over 270 Russian volunteers currently participate in the project. The donations are mainly used to buy medicine for Ukrainian refugees in Georgia. Like many other Russian migrant initiatives to help Ukrainian refugees (e.g. 'Volunteers Tbilisi', 'Foundation Motskhaleba', 'Choose to Help' and 'Reforum Space'), this project only came into being after its founders left Russia.

### ► FIGURE 14

‘We thought that if [another] initiative already deals with food, personal hygiene products, and clothes, why not take care of medicines [...] and we fully concentrated on this. Ukrainian refugees come to us with different physiological and psychological problems, and now we help them with medicines. [...] We wanted to send [medicines to Ukraine], but then we thought there is actually a sufficient number of organisations doing this. That's why, well, we decided since we are here, why not concentrate on helping refugees here [...]—after all, medicines are not cheap, really. We just wanted to take at least some of the burden off them so that they would not have to worry about that.

*(Katerina Kiltau, Emigration for Action, Tbilisi, December 2022)*

### FIGURE 14

**Medicine for Ukrainian refugees in Georgia supplied by Emigration for Action**



Source: <https://t.me/emigrationforaction>, April 2023

To sum up, Russian migrants in Germany and Georgia are similarly engaged in providing humanitarian support to Ukrainians in their host countries and in a transnational context. Yet the tensions related to public political representation, which can be observed in both countries, are more intense in Germany.

## Conclusion

What happens to 'voice' after 'exit' in the context of war and war censorship? Putin's strategy of pushing activists to leave Russia does not seem to be having the desired silencing effect. This report has found evidence of voice through exit. Though only a minority of Russian migrants are politically active and participate in public protests, the activists among them remain closely attuned to developments within Russia and direct their actions and voices towards multiple audiences in different countries. Social and political activism is a highly dynamic process in the context of migration. What emerged from the study is a proliferation of migrants' de-centralised activism relying on 'horizontal voices' directed to the four major audiences—home country, host country, Russian migrants and Ukrainians.

Under the current circumstances, addressing audiences in Russia has become especially challenging not only for anti-war activists in the country, but also for migrant activists. Nevertheless, in Georgia and Germany, the latter provide independent information to people in Russia via social media, as well as financial and moral support to regime opponents and civil society actors in the home country. The scope of this activism includes legal advice, psychological support, and practical tools to exit.

Potential audiences in the two host countries vary widely. Russian migrants in Georgia often avoid direct engagement with Georgian audiences. This is due in part to their fear of being associated with Russian imperialism and in part to Georgian scepticism about mass migration from Russia. Georgian society's cautious attitude towards Russian migrants may play a role in social isolation of Russian migrants from the receiving society and in the ways in which migrants' engagement, networks and practices of resistance to the authoritarian regime are evolving.

In Germany, Russian activists have more diverse interactions with local civil society and political actors and make demands of them. The migrants in turn are expected to visibly demonstrate their anti-regime and anti-war stance.

In both countries, activists-turned-migrants are building new socially and politically engaged diasporic communities abroad as an inclusive project that encompasses humanitarian and political goals, including support for Ukraine, distancing from the Russian state, and solidarity with the opposition and people affected by repression in Russia. Integrating the various migrant initiatives and making their commitment visible to an international public is a major challenge.

In both host countries, there is a danger that activists will primarily exchange ideas with like-minded people, without their political activism

spreading to other migrants and the general public. This echo-chamber effect may weaken the social and political participation of Russian migrants in both societies. Especially in Germany, gaps between generations of migrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union and between people with different migration experiences have become apparent. Intensifying cooperation with some 'older' Russian-speaking communities, including second-generation migrants, would allow recent migrants to benefit from their cultural and social capital and expand their target audience.

Not everybody who is against Putin's regime and the war is willing and able to leave Russia. However, the number of political migrants from Russia continues to increase in line with growing repression and shrinking spaces for action. For many political migrants who originally left Russia for other countries, Germany is seen as a long-term destination. That is why it is important for the host countries to be open to different migration paths, such as the humanitarian visa solution in Germany, and to adapt their migration regimes to changing circumstances.

Building and maintaining infrastructure to support newcomers, an important area of Russian migrant activism, will remain critical. Beyond the contribution this makes to providing immediate humanitarian assistance in a situation of uncertainty, the political dimension should not be underestimated: support networks can speed up the mobilisation of people who have had to leave urgently by helping them overcome bureaucratic, financial and organisational hurdles. Such networked structures have grown, but to attain a higher level of professionalisation and efficiency, they will need sustained institutional and infrastructural support from civil society and political institutions in the host countries. In Georgia, policymakers and the opposition have so far not shown much interest in supporting the anti-war activities of Russian migrants, whom they tend to view as temporary residents in a 'transit country'. Despite the many uncertainties, the Russian migrants' activism can contribute to the empowerment of democratic voices among migrants in both countries and to the formation of a new Russian diaspora.

## Imprint

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