

ESCAPE OF YOUNG RUSSIANS TO KAZAKHSTAN: POLITICAL VIEWS AND RELATIONS WITH THE HOST SOCIETY AND STATE

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Almost four years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Russian emigrants are scattered across different parts of the world. Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the key destinations for this post-2022 wave of emigration due to its geographical proximity, linguistic accessibility, and relatively open migration regime. This article presents a narrative analysis of interviews with young Russian emigrants who relocated to Kazakhstan after the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The study examines how migrants articulate their motivations for leaving Russia, their political views, and their reflections on Russian domestic politics and military actions in Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to how political positioning and personal life circumstances shape migrants' everyday experiences and strategies of adaptation.

The article analyzes how migrants interact with the host state and society, as well as how they navigate legal and institutional frameworks. Applying the exit, voice, and loyalty framework, the study shows that emigration often functions as a moral and political exit without complete disengagement from the homeland. Adaptation strategies combine pragmatic, social, and cultural adjustments in context-dependent and heterogeneous ways.

Keywords: Young Russians; Migrants; Relocants; Identity; Political Attitudes; Adaptation Strategies; Kazakhstan

Nearly four years after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens remain living in exile after fleeing the country. A review of data by Re:Russia, an independent media and think tank platform founded in 2022 by political analyst Kirill Rogov*, estimates that between 820,000 and 920,000 people have left Russia since February 2022 (Re:Russia 2023). Since then, numerous studies have been surveying the new Russian emigration. Some examined manifesta-

* Здесь и далее * указывает на то, что лица и организации внесены Минюстом РФ в реестр иностранных агентов. (From here on, * indicates that the persons and organizations have been listed in the register of foreign agents by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.)

tions of political (Korableva 2023) and environmental activism in the countries of the South Caucasus (Tysiachniouk and Konnov 2022; Baranova and Podolsky 2023); others have raised the issue of constructing identity through digital storytelling in a new environment (Purgina and Menshikov 2023) as well as the problem of political views (Krawatzek et al. 2023[†]). Several have dealt with identifying the pull and push factors of migration (Melkumyan and Melkonyan 2023; Rapoport 2023), the influence of emigration on the economic life of host societies (Sahadeo 2024), or the economic strategies of Russian emigrants (Volkova et al. 2023[†]).

Despite this growing literature, significantly less attention has been paid to Russian migrants who relocated to Central Asia, and particularly to Kazakhstan, even though it became one of the main destinations of post-2022 emigration. According to official data, more than 400,000 chose Kazakhstan as a destination following the announcement of partial mobilization on September 21, 2022, several months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. According to the Kazakh Ministry of Internal Affairs, from January 2023 to September 2024, over 80,000 Russian citizens obtained work residence permits. Including their family members and remote workers, the number of those who relocated is estimated at approximately 100,000–120,000 people (Klevtsov 2025). The case of Kazakhstan is of particular interest given its historical and demographic context: Around 3 million ethnic Russians live in the country (and most of them have Kazakhstani citizenship), representing approximately 15 percent of the total population, according to the Bureau of National Statistics (2025).

Kazakhstan's post-Soviet nation-building trajectory may further complicate the reception of new Russian migrants. At the moment of independence in 1991, Kazakhstan was the only independent republic of the former USSR where the titular nationality constituted a minority. The significant Russian population and the Soviet legacy of Russification complicated early nation-building efforts. However, the subsequent policy of Kazakhization led to an increase of the share of ethnic Kazakhs to 71 percent of the population (Bureau of National Statistics 2025), while some members of the Russian population came to perceive themselves as marginalized within a state emphasizing Kazakh national identity. Although the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, an advisory body, was established in 1995 to represent the interests of Kazakhstan's various ethnic minorities, including the Russian population, ethnic divisions persisted (Peyrouse 2007:482–483). According to recent research, a fragile balance between Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking populations exists in Kazakhstani society today (Blackburn 2019:217). Against this backdrop, the influx of new Russian migrants presents an important case for analyzing how migration may affect Kazakhstan's social cohesion and interethnic relations.

This study examines how young Russian migrants who relocated to Kazakhstan following the partial mobilization in September 2022 adapt to new social, cultural,

[†] Здесь и далее [†] указывает на то, что цитируемые источники созданы и/или опубликованы организациями, внесенными Минюстом РФ в перечень нежелательных организаций. (From here on, [†] indicates that the cited sources were created and/or published by organizations included in the list of undesirable organizations by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.)

and institutional conditions and how their motivations, political positioning, and personal life circumstances shape their adaptation strategies and engagement with the host society. By focusing on their lived experiences and narratives, the study also explores how cross-border mobility reshapes interethnic relations and national imaginaries in post-Soviet Eurasia, highlighting the intersections of migration, politics, and belonging amid geopolitical tensions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

According to Alfred Schuetz's (1944) concept of the stranger, newcomers interpret a new sociocultural environment through familiar categories and experiences formed within their original society. This reliance on habitual cognitive schemes often leads to cultural misunderstandings and challenges in adapting to new social norms. John Berry's (1997) classical theory of acculturation provides a useful framework for analyzing these processes among Russian emigrants. Berry identified four main strategies: integration (maintaining one's culture while adopting aspects of the new one), assimilation (fully adopting the host culture), separation (avoiding contact with the host society), and marginalization (identifying with neither society).

Although Berry's model remains influential, it has been criticized for its simplicity and static nature. It tends to frame adaptation as an individual choice, overlooking structural constraints, sociopolitical context, and intergroup dynamics. Individuals may shift strategies across domains and over time, and outcomes depend on interactions with both the host society and the community of origin (Bourhis et al. 1997; Rudmin 2003; Bhatia and Ram 2009; Phillimore 2011; Kunst and Sam 2013; Ward 2013).

For this study, the approach proposed by Seth Schwartz and colleagues is particularly relevant, as it conceptualizes migrant adaptation as a dynamic, context-dependent, and multilayered process. The reception context, both national and local, shapes migrants' responses, sets the boundaries of available strategies, and determines the degree of fit between individuals and the social environments in which they become embedded (Schwartz et al. 2010:15). For young Russian migrants who relocated to Kazakhstan following the announcement of partial mobilization in 2022, this context includes not only the country's sociocultural features but also the institutional conditions of employment and legal residence.

Allon Vishkin, Gabriel Horenczyk, and Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom (2021) argue that migrants' adaptation is shaped by the motivations behind their relocation, which guide and interact with the specific practices they adopt. These motivations, however, are realized within concrete life circumstances, and research on social integration highlights that individuals' characteristics, such as age, gender, partnership status, family situation, income, and length of stay, significantly influence the strategies migrants adopt (Li et al. 2021:3). More mobile and flexible patterns of behavior tend to be characteristic of young, single, and childless individuals, whereas partnership and parental responsibilities significantly structure migration trajectories and the range of viable strategies (Ryan and Mulholland 2014:587). Thus, the interaction

between motivational orientations and migrants' life-stage factors helps explain the variability in everyday practices and forms of social incorporation.

At the same time, migrants' adaptation is shaped by broader social, historical, and postcolonial conditions, which are particularly significant for Russian migrants in Kazakhstan. Their interactions with the host society are influenced by the legacies of imperial and Soviet rule, historical status asymmetries, Russification, and competing collective narratives of the past. In such circumstances, traditional notions of "successful adaptation" prove insufficient to fully explain processes of social inclusion, the development of a sense of belonging, and mutual recognition. From a postcolonial perspective (Bhabha 1994; Tlostanova 2010; Etkind 2011; Laruelle 2012), these interactions can also be seen as a space where mixed or hybrid identities emerge. Migrants may find themselves navigating between different cultural worlds, while historical power relations and symbolic hierarchies continue to influence how they are perceived by others and how they see themselves.

Additionally, this experience can be understood as a transitional, liminal period marked by uncertainty, in which migrants find themselves between their former and new sociocultural environments: They have left their country of origin but have not yet fully integrated into the host society. For many Russian migrants in Kazakhstan, the postrelocation phase does not have a clearly defined endpoint; rather, it represents a prolonged intermediate stage in which temporary circumstances gradually become routine and normalized, a dynamic discussed in studies of migration temporariness and liminality (Tsoni 2016; Marotta 2025). Theoretically, this highlights that periods of migratory mobility often lack a definitive conclusion and create an open-ended "in-between" that shapes adaptation processes and identity formation.

In this study, it is appropriate to apply the concept of exit, voice, and loyalty, originally developed by Albert Hirschman (1970), to analyze the motivations of young emigrants relocating to Kazakhstan and the political orientations of this group. This concept, originally designed to explain reactions to declining performance within organizations, offers a useful framework for understanding how individuals respond to dissatisfaction with a system. Applied to the sociopolitical sphere, this model suggests that when people face crisis or disillusionment within their country, they also choose between exit (for example, emigration), voice (protest, critique, civic engagement), and loyalty, which can act as a moderating factor. Importantly, loyalty does not necessarily imply approval; rather, it can temporarily delay both exit and voice, affecting how long individuals remain engaged in the sociopolitical system before protesting or emigrating (Hoffmann 2008:57).

Recent studies have expanded Hirschman's original model by integrating approaches from transnational migration, providing a deeper understanding of the new dynamics of mobility and its political consequences (Hoffmann 2008:59). In particular, these studies emphasize a reconceptualization of loyalty as a far more complex and multilayered phenomenon. Recent work shows that the classical model does not fully capture this diversity: In practice, loyalty manifests through multiple forms of emotional and cultural attachment to the community of origin, as well as through strategic engagement abroad. Moreover, exit and voice often coexist and

reinforce one another, particularly under conditions of transnational mobility, where emigrants continue political participation from abroad (Hoffmann 2008; Burgess 2012; Helms 2024). Hirschman himself later acknowledged that migration, rather than suppress, may in fact expand opportunities for expressing voice, as exemplified by the East German exodus before the fall of the Berlin Wall (Hirschman 1993). Contemporary research further demonstrates that migrants frequently retain loyalty to their communities of origin and continue forms of political participation after departure (Burgess 2012:48). This challenges Hirschman's original assumption of mutual exclusivity between exit and voice and highlights the need to rethink the nature and function of loyalty in the context of international migration (Hoffmann 2008:59–60). In this vein, Marian Ádnanes (2004), Bert Hoffmann (2008), and later Lorenzo Gabrielli and Ricard Zapata-Barbero (2015) have demonstrated that emigration can simultaneously embody strategies of exit, voice, and loyalty, enacted through transnational networks, diasporic mobilization, and the maintenance of cultural identity.

From this perspective, the shift from a classical understanding of national societies to a paradigm of transnational migration represents a significant reinterpretation of Hirschman's categories. Where the original model treated these options as alternatives, in the context of global mobility they increasingly intersect and become mutually reinforcing. Exit ceases to be the opposite of loyalty: Migrants maintain emotional, cultural, and political attachment to their country of origin. Likewise, leaving does not entail a loss of voice; rather, it transforms the spaces and channels through which it is expressed (Hoffmann 2008:68).

It is precisely this political dimension of the model that makes it particularly useful for analyzing contemporary Russian emigration. Political orientations play a key role in shaping how individuals distance themselves, resist, or maintain ties with their country of origin, as well as the adaptation strategies and forms of engagement they pursue in new contexts. In the context of post-2022 emigration from Russia, "loyalty" often transforms into new forms of political and cultural engagement abroad, while "exit" becomes a way of rethinking citizenship and responsibility. Therefore, examining not only the sociocultural adaptation but also the political orientations of young emigrants is crucial for understanding how they construct new models of belonging and civic engagement beyond Russia.

Building on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, narrative analysis was chosen for its ability to examine how individuals transform experiences into coherent and meaningful stories. When narrators share stories, they position themselves in time and space, organizing and interpreting their experiences. Narrative discourse provides access to subjective experience and cultural patterns (Bamberg 2012:87–88). As Catherine Riessman (1993) notes, narratives reflect social life through individual stories, revealing culturally conditioned meanings. A key aspect is that narratives are not purely individual creations but social constructs shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Murray 1999:53; Sparkes 2005:192–194). This approach balances individual agency with contextual factors, viewing the individual within historical, social, political, and economic frameworks (Brettell 2016:42).

The main tool for data collection was narrative and semistructured interviews with Russians aged 21 to 32 who emigrated to Kazakhstan following the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia in September 2022 due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine earlier that year. In total, 14 interviews were conducted: 11 with men and 3 with women. Such gender disbalance can be explained by the fact that mass emigration to Kazakhstan resulted from the military mobilization in Russia; thus, it was mainly young men who left in a hurry, which will be discussed in more details below. This does not mean that women did not emigrate to Kazakhstan from Russia, but they often followed their partners rather than relocated there by their own choice. Recruiting female participants proved particularly challenging; however, the three women interviewed provided valuable insights into everyday adaptation, social networks, and gendered migration experiences, thus enriching the dataset with alternative perspectives. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2023. One interview took place in Taldykorgan, a city of about 200,000 in western Kazakhstan; the rest were in Almaty, the country's former capital. Respondents were recruited through Telegram channels for relocants, informal communication, and public events within the Russian-speaking community. Each conversation was anonymized and audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

The selected respondents came from different geographical regions of Russia (for example, Samara, Murmansk, Moscow, Chelyabinsk, Tomsk, Khabarovsk, Vorkuta, etc.), which greatly distinguished the September wave of migration from the February one, where the vast majority of relocatees arrived from Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Krawatzek et al. 2023:3[†]). Most of the respondents had higher education, with a minority having completed postsecondary vocational or specialized secondary education. They represented a wide range of professions, including actor, manager, chemist, teacher, railway worker, programmer, and others. Most respondents were single; only two women reported having partners (one of whom was an ethnic Kazakh from Kazakhstan who had previously lived in Russia), and one man had a family (wife and children) who remained in Russia at the time of interview.

PORTRAIT OF YOUNG RUSSIAN EMIGRANTS IN KAZAKHSTAN: MOTIVATION FOR MOVING, CONDITIONS OF STAY

Following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, there was a massive exodus of Russians to the post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Kazakhstan became one of the main destinations for migration from Russia, mainly due to the presence of a long border between the two states, which made it possible to cross the frontier at various points coming from different geographical regions of Russia. In addition, Russian migrants were obviously attracted to the chosen country by the prevalence of the Russian language at both the everyday and official levels, the country's general historical and cultural background, and the relatively affordable cost of living.

Before mass emigration from Russia started, Kazakhstan's visa policy toward Russians was quite liberal. Citizens of the Russian Federation could enter the country

only with an internal Russian passport, without the need for a travel passport. Regardless of the type of passport, Russians could stay in Kazakhstan for 90 days as tourists without a visa or residence permit. This facilitated wide spread of the practice of “visa run,” when migrants would leave Kazakhstan for a short period thus legally resetting their permitted period of stay in the country. However, since January 2023, Kazakhstan’s migration policy has become stricter. The government has amended the rules for entry and stay of immigrants in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Now, Russian citizens can only stay in the country for 90 days within a 180-day period, which does not allow to restart the allowed period of stay in the country every time a foreigner crosses the state border (Smailov 2022). As a result, those intending to remain in Kazakhstan for longer need to apply for a temporary residence permit. Such rules did exist in the country before, but many foreigners disregarded them.

Kazakhstan had previously been tolerant of the practice of “visa run.” In the border areas of Shymkent and Almaty in the south of the country, migrants were transported by busload to Kyrgyzstan, and familiar border guards were expecting them. In 2023 changes in Kazakhstan’s migration policy led to the spread of illegal practices, such as the purchase of fake residence permits and false employment certificates, reflecting the migrants’ initial difficulties in securing legal employment (Baltatarova* 2023). These practices were frequently adopted due to their relative simplicity and speed, as respondents emphasized that the process of legalizing foreign residents in Kazakhstan remained highly complex and nontransparent. However, some migrants were able to find legal employment, which was largely determined by their professional field and level of qualification. Specialists in areas such as information technology or finance, for instance, faced fewer difficulties in formalizing their work status.

The political situation in the host country regarding more politically active Russian migrants was quite tense. For example, a Russian journalist of Buryat origin founded a public organization in Kazakhstan called Point of (No) Return (Tochka [ne]vozvrata), which provides assistance to other Russians who have arrived in Kazakhstan. However, the journalist was detained several times in Kazakhstan. Although the legal charges brought against her in Russia did not constitute grounds for extradition or deportation under Kazakhstani law, she reportedly faced difficulties in extending her temporary residence permit and was later denied refugee status. According to her account, these developments may have been connected to her engagement with local political issues and contacts with Kazakhstani opposition figures. During her first attempt to leave Kazakhstan, she was detained at Astana airport. On her second attempt, in January 2024, she successfully relocated to France, where she was granted political asylum (Alimova 2024[†]).

In 2022 nearly 3 million Russian citizens entered Kazakhstan (this number includes tourists and those passing through). By 2024 between 150,000 and 300,000 Russian migrants were residing in the country (Sahadeo 2024:7); of these, over 80,000 had obtained official work residence permits between January 2023 and September 2024, and, including their family members and remote workers, the Russian migrant population is estimated at approximately 100,000–120,000 (Klevtsov 2025).

Researchers distinguish two main streams of emigration from Russia: The postinvasion group (the so-called Februarists) is characterized primarily as political emigration; the postmobilization group (or Septembrists), which is designated as an emergency evacuation, endows migrants with the characteristics of refugees. Moving to Kazakhstan became popular among Russians during the second wave of emigration, while the first-wave emigrants preferred the states of the South Caucasus (Kamalov et al. 2023:3¹).

The main reasons for the decision to emigrate for young Russians were the deteriorating political situation in the country and the loss of a sense of personal security associated with the announcement of partial mobilization. However, not all emigrants were at risk of mobilization; some were unsuitable for conscription into the Russian army, some worked at facilities of national importance whose workers were not called up for service, and women (including my three interviewees) are not subject to conscription in Russia. Respondents acted with spontaneity and speed in making the decision to move. However, unlike the February emigration, they considered various scenarios and, sometimes without fully realizing it, subconsciously prepared for a possible departure from their homeland: “The mobilization was the last straw. I just did not believe that it would be announced, but once it was, I knew I had to leave” (male, 30, Almaty, August 28, 2023). “I moved partly because of the mobilization, but I had such thoughts already after the start of the war. About a week later, when I went to Pushkin Square [in Moscow, a known site for antiwar protests], I felt deeply sad. And after the announcement of the mobilization, I no longer had any doubts [about the need to emigrate]” (male, 25, Almaty, September 7, 2023).

Kazakhstan was not a popular tourist destination for Russians before Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, unlike Armenia and Georgia, which were familiar as attractive vacation destinations. To my respondents Kazakhstan had seemed like a “very distant country,” but it turned out that this was not true at all (male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023). Young adults chose Kazakhstan because it seemed a more realistic route, the closest and not yet as crowded with other fleeing Russians as other emigration routes:

Without a passport, I had very few options: Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan. . . . It seemed to me that Kazakhstan was the best option. Armenia itself is in a military conflict with Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan is a poorer country than Kazakhstan. . . . Georgia is expensive. And I didn’t want to go where the largest number of people chose. I was afraid that I would have to stand in lines for a very long time there. (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023)

In the professional sphere, finding employment was easiest for workers in the information technology field, particularly for those who already held remote positions or had been relocated by international companies with offices in Kazakhstan. According to HeadHunter Kazakhstan, in the first half of 2022, employers posted about 20,000 vacancies in the IT sector, which is almost twice as many as in 2020. The most popular professions included engineer, software developer, web engineer, webmaster, system administrator, and technical support specialist. In the first half of

2022, more than 50,000 residents of Kazakhstan were looking for work in the field of information technology. The growth in the number of active applicants in 2022 increased ninefold compared to 2019 (Rakhmonov 2023:165). This increase is most likely associated with a new wave of emigration from Russia.

Finding a job was more difficult for younger people who moved without work experience and were still in the process of finding themselves professionally. Relocants preferred to work for Kazakhstani or international companies. On the one hand, this desire is justified by their reluctance to work for Russian entrepreneurs and divert taxes to the state. On the other hand, from a practical point of view, employment in a Kazakhstani company provides an opportunity to establish legal residency in the country. Additionally, the significant weakening of the exchange rate of the Russian ruble against the Kazakhstani tenge in the aftermath of the start of the armed conflict made life more difficult for some Russian migrants employed in Russia, leading them to quickly look for work in the local labor market (Zubov 2024). Only a few of my respondents continued to work for Russian companies, mainly due to the specific nature of their professional fields and the difficulty of retraining in a short period. However, these migrants were also beginning to search for employment opportunities in Kazakhstan.

The main source for news and information exchange for emigrants are Telegram chat channels, where people also provide help and assistance to relocants. After the initial adaptation and resolution of basic issues related to housing, finding a job, and legalization in the country, Russian emigrants began socializing by joining various Telegram chats based on their interests. According to one informant, she joined interest-based Telegram groups to socialize and attend hobby-related meetups, and in these groups she noticed that most of the members were Russians, including both locals and relocants (female, 22, August 23, 2023). When searching for respondents for this study, I found many groups on Telegram the names of which contained the term “relocants” rather than “emigrants.” This also indicates the separation of oneself from other immigrants in Kazakhstan, as well as a specific self-identification: “It seems to me that everyone still doesn’t want to call themselves immigrants because they still have hope. Relocation seems to be something frivolous and more temporary than emigration. And in my understanding, people simply have hope that they will return soon” (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023).

This feeling of temporariness reflects a liminal condition, in which relocants remain suspended between departure and settlement, physically integrated into a new space yet emotionally and symbolically still connected to the place they left behind (Tsoni 2016; Marotta 2025). Migration here appears as a prolonged transitional phase, marked by uncertainty and the coexistence of belonging and detachment.

For most respondents, the decision to leave was driven by fear, uncertainty, and moral rejection of the Russian government’s military actions, while Kazakhstan was perceived as the most realistic and familiar destination due to its open borders, Russian-speaking environment, and shared historical background. From the perspective of Hirschman’s (1970) concept, migration became a form of political “exit,” a silent

expression of dissent and a way to withdraw from an increasingly repressive state where the open articulation of “voice” had become dangerous or ineffective. Kazakhstan, due to its geographical and linguistic proximity, as well as its relative openness, appeared more as a pragmatic refuge than a final destination.

At the same time, the tightening of migration rules and the opacity of legalization procedures complicated the situation for emigrants, prompting some to resort to informal strategies. The success of adaptation largely depended on professional experience: Specialists in IT and finance found it significantly easier to settle in the new environment. By defining themselves as “relocants” rather than “emigrants,” many young Russians convey a sense of the temporariness of their situation and preserve the hope of return.

POLITICAL VALUES OF YOUNG RUSSIANS IN EXILE AND ASSESSMENT OF MILITARY ACTIONS IN UKRAINE

When discussing the possibility of establishing a democratic system in Russia, my respondents expressed skepticism, citing the unpreparedness of both the state apparatus and society for such a transformation: “Democracy was better for Russia, I would like to say . . . but for Russia to get there, a lot needs to be changed: the ruling elite, public institutions, and, above all, people’s attitudes” (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023). Their narratives were filled with disbelief regarding Russia’s democratic prospects: “I believe that democracy is not suitable for Russia because you first need to somehow clear people’s minds. I would like there to be a democracy, but there are many buts. . . People won’t accept it, a whole generation must change so that there is no ‘political impotence,’ so to speak” (male, 30, Almaty, August 28, 2023). These attitudes echo earlier findings: According to a 2014 survey, 62 percent of respondents considered democracy necessary, yet 55 percent believed it must have “national specificity,” while 45 percent were convinced that Western democracy was “destructive” for Russia (Levada-Center* 2014).¹

A young respondent from Bashkortostan, who lived in Moscow at the time of invasion of Ukraine, was completely critical of the Western version of the democratic system of government in Russia since “democracy is the choice of the majority, and the majority can be manipulated, which is not always comfortable and convenient for others,” but it is better when “there are people and their interests, and there is no need to impose different orders on people.” For example, “America, Europe is trying to impose its interests on other nations, and it believes that democracy, liberalism, etc. are needed by everyone. But not everyone needs it.”

¹ More recent empirical findings show that young Russians hold more nuanced attitudes toward the West than often assumed. A survey by Levada-Center* in October 2023 found that 61 percent of respondents aged 18–34 believed Russia should improve relations with Western countries—a higher share than in the general population (El Baz et al. 2024). Focus group data indicate, however, that young Russians’ views of the West often remain superficial and stereotypical, centered mainly on perceptions of material prosperity and a “better life,” while references to human rights or political freedoms are far less common (Levada-Center* 2020).

I believe that at the moment there is no ideal system in the world for how people should exist on this planet. It cannot be said that someone is more right, someone less. . . . I would like Russia to be more decentralized, but I would not like a collapse, of course. Rather, it is necessary to give more autonomy to the regions so that they can exist on their own, not depend on the federal budget. In theory, we already have a federation, but I would like to have more freedom from Moscow for communication with the world. (male, 32, Almaty, September 9, 2023)

At the same time, most respondents sincerely perceived themselves as patriots of Russia and clearly distinguished between, on the one hand, loyalty to the state and support for the chosen political course and, on the other hand, attachment to the homeland. Sometimes, the interviewees were very emotional in their narration:

For me, patriotism is not love for the state; for me, patriotism is love for those closest to me. I love my country; I like the people; I absolutely do not like the government. I think it's an out-of-touch older generation. But I love my friends; I love my family. And this is also part of this country, part of this heritage. And I am interested in culture; that is, this is my home. I do not accept that because of the ambitions of old farts, I should leave it, I should be oppressed, I should be a dissident. This makes me very angry. (female, 22, Taldykorgan, July 31, 2023)

As Marlene Laruelle (2015:25) notes, the central element of Russian patriotism has long been the memory of World War II and the promotion of conservative values such as “traditional” family and “national” culture. Contrary to the ideas promoted by the state, patriotism among young people is primarily defined as territorial attachment, the desire to spend their lives in their homeland, the preservation of culture, and concern for their fellow citizens, while maintaining distance from support for state policies and participation in its projects (male, 26, Almaty, August 13, 2023; male, 25, Almaty, September 7, 2023). In addition, family becomes an important object of patriotic feelings. They also refer to it as “healthy patriotism” (male, 29, Almaty, August 10, 2023), that is, a critical approach to the perception of the “true” interests of the state and, on the opposite side, the goals of the ruling elites. This narrative is quite common among the young generation and is actively reproduced, including through the musical compositions of Russian rock and rap musicians from 2000 to 2020 (e.g., Spleen, Lumen, Bi-2, Noize MC [Ivan Alekseev*], Oxxxymiron [Miron Fyodorov*], and others), who are very popular among this group.

Conversely, some respondents expressed complete detachment from national identity, identifying instead with European values and societies:

I don't have this patriotism in me, it just so happens, neither to the country nor to anything else. Seeing what these older men are doing to the population, including veterans. I am simply disgusted by all this—in what poverty people live, and so on, and so forth. I'm a young man oriented toward Europe; what's happening here [in Russia] is terrible. . . . Nothing holds me back; I have no property; I do not have a wife who cannot move. What has Russia given me? (male, 21, Almaty, September 14, 2023)

Relocants were pessimistic about Russia's future, repeating a common opposition refrain that "formal victory would put Russia on the path of North Korea, and a defeat for Russia would lead to economic, social, and cultural decline" (female, 22, Taldykorgan, July 31, 2023). Such discourse, often drawn from opposition media, shaped a shared oppositional worldview among young migrants.

Young emigrants did not make long-term plans for their own future due to instability of the international situation. In the initial period after forced migration, many young people wanted to return to Russia and did not consider Kazakhstan a permanent place of residence. At the time of the study, in the summer of 2023, the respondents had been in exile for a year, and after some time, they began to consider other options for emigration. Their plans for the future were very vague and constantly changing: Some wanted to wait out the next few years in Kazakhstan and then decide in which direction to move further, others were already looking for countries for further relocation, and some preferred to keep moving from place to place for an indefinite period of time. The choice of destination depends on existing social connections and the possibility and difficulty of obtaining a visa. At the moment, none of the respondents were planning to return to Russia. At the beginning of the move, they were prevented from returning by the threat to their personal safety. Now, they argued, a cessation of military operations in Ukraine was no longer enough for them return to their homeland. They were waiting for more dramatic changes in the Russian political system and a change in the ruling elite of the state. At the same time, respect for the right to freedom of speech, which all respondents mentioned, and personal safety, without which they cannot openly express their position, plays an important role for young emigrants: "If, let's say, the war ends, there will be reparations, there will be some problems, and if suddenly some power changes and declares, 'Here we are waiting, we want to get up off our knees,' then perhaps I will take the risk, drop everything, and go maybe to a factory, an enterprise, a scientific activity that I had to abandon, to somehow get up, help, engage" (male, 30, Almaty, August 28, 2023).

Young emigrants recognized the responsibility of Russian society for previous inaction and passivity in the country's political life, which, in their opinion, contributed to the military confrontation in Ukraine. However, at the same time, they tried to understand the position of Russian citizens and justify their inaction by the fact that "for the last 20 years they just wanted and tried to live normally, and therefore they simply went along with everything that was happening. And they allowed all the screws and mechanisms to be tightened, which led to a situation where right now society seems no longer able to do anything" (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023). On the other hand, increased pressure from security forces, the lack of a real right to freedom of speech, and the risk of ending up in prison during unauthorized rallies and attempts to express their views led young people to admit that they had no real opportunity to show their disagreement with the current situation in the country. In addition, young emigrants are trying to distance themselves from personal responsibility for the current state of affairs and shift the blame onto the older generation.

Their main argument is that they have never elected the current president or shown support for the regime:

I understand these grandmothers. . . . My grandmother was born under Stalin; she remembers Stalin's funeral. How can she understand what freedom is? For her, [President Vladimir] Putin is some kind of savior. . . . For them, everything good that they say about what our government has done now, everything that they say on TV for them, is the truth. That is, propaganda works for them. On the one hand, I feel their responsibility; they chose him; on the other hand, who is to blame for the fact that they chose him if, for them, it was better than what was before? It's ambiguous. (female, 22, Almaty, August 23, 2023)

I don't know if a person who was born in a remote village and only has Channel 1 [on television] is a patriot; he heard about the war and goes to defend the interests of his homeland; he has patriotic views. He can be called a patriot. But he has this view. And I left, but I have a different view. (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023)

Formally recognizing the Russian government as responsible for the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and expressing their disagreement with the policies by leaving, some respondents noted that "just as Russian society is responsible for what Russia does, so the whole world is responsible, the West and Ukraine. Everyone is to blame, some more, some less. . . . If we take Europe as a whole, they probably turned a blind eye to some of the things Russia did. I think that Europe also set precedents that Putin could then sell to his society, with regard to Kosovo, Yugoslavia" (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023).

Along with this, there were also more critical views on the involvement of Western countries in the outbreak of the military confrontation, reflecting narratives commonly promoted by the Russian state:

Well, I would also like to see America leave Russia alone. You can discuss this topic as much as you like, but I am convinced that it is in the nature of such a hegemon to interfere in any political situation. Whenever something does not suit it, it inevitably gets involved and tries to turn events to its own advantage. We can certainly discuss how poorly Russia is behaving now, but in my view, the United States has been behaving even worse for many decades. Why do they constantly interfere in matters that do not concern them, provoking China, then Russia, and others in turn? (male, 32, Almaty, September 9, 2023)

Regarding the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, respondents stated the need to return these lands to the Ukrainian state or hold fair referendums there. Some respondents even argued that they do not see Russia as a unified state: "Russia's problem is that it is an undissolved empire" (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023). Attitudes about Crimea's territorial status reflect the divergence of views on territorial issues. Respondents agreed that the occupation of Crimea by Russia was unlawful and formally expressed disagreement with the events of 2014. Some

emigrants said that Crimea should be returned under the control of Ukraine or that an independent referendum is necessary. Others, in contrast, did not have a clear idea for resolving this dilemma since many Russians have moved to Crimea over the past 10 years:

It's also complicated about Crimea because my family lives in Crimea (they moved there after 2014). I think the territory should be returned, but I don't know how to do the logistics or how it's possible. That is, I think it would be right, but I don't think it's necessary to do it that way. Since many years have passed, many Russians have moved there, and some Ukrainians have left. It would be morally right, but I don't know how to do it logistically. (female, 22, Almaty, August 23, 2023)

Thus, the political views of young Russian emigrants take on different ideological contours and cannot be generalized as clearly liberal or democratic in the Western sense. However, it is obvious that they are characterized by their anti-Putin orientation and a critical attitude toward the current policies of the Russian government, which distinguishes them from the views of the majority of the Russian population. As we see from the examples given, the military invasion has impacted, among other things, the transformation of young people's identities. New dynamics have emerged to reject self-identification with Russia, but we also note increased emotional attachment to the homeland.

RELATIONS WITH THE KAZAKH STATE AND ITS SOCIETY

Many respondents recalled that during the first months after moving, the local community "welcomed us quite warmly and with understanding" (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023; male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023) and offered various forms of assistance. Negative attitudes toward new migrants were expressed mainly online, where locals criticized the influx of Russians, particularly due to rising housing prices, and occasionally in the form of individual private remarks.

When assessing local society, a young respondent, citing situations from personal experience in Kazakhstan, stated that these are "very stupid people who are for Kazakhstan, for Islam." He characterized the local environment as nationalistic, conservative, fearful, and dogmatic, noting that he sometimes felt unsafe in public spaces: "When I walk down the street, I can hear negative comments, for example, I have long hair, I wear it in a braid. . . . I wear a pink T-shirt. Even at work, they react differently. . . . you still feel this tension" (male, 22, Almaty, August 10, 2023). Another participant also remarked that "men, both Russians and Kazakhs, don't wear white. A winter jacket shouldn't even be gray; it has to be black, because you're a man. But I have earrings and long hair—no way" (male, 21, Almaty, September 14, 2023). Such observations by the respondents indicate cultural shock when confronted with the values and norms of another culture, which clearly contradict their own worldviews. Such assessments also led them to think about the need for further emigration to Western countries.

Another respondent assessed Kazakhstan as lagging behind “somewhere in cultural development and, of course, economically, that is, cultural inconsistencies.” His interaction with the local society occurs mainly in the local Russian community: “My friends and acquaintances are mostly local Russians. It does not mean that I have a bad relationship with the Kazakhs. It’s just that friendship and everyday communication are more complicated. We even had a group at work called the ‘Slavic circle,’ since we naturally gravitated toward one another” (male, 32, Almaty, September 9, 2023).

Although himself of Bashkir origin, this respondent found “Eastern culture and mentality rather less familiar, less comfortable, than European.” Working as a photographer in Kazakhstan, he noted that Russian-speaking clients were “more grateful and polite” than local Kazakhs, which he associates with the level of upbringing and local cultural characteristics. The same respondent mentioned the problem of ageism in local society toward the younger generation, “when you are obliged to respect an older person, to do something more for him, even if he does not deserve it.” He connected this with the lack of politeness and culture of behavior among people in Kazakhstan (male, 32, Almaty, September 9, 2023). These observations indicate that the respondent feels discriminated against because of his age in a society where seniority and authority are traditionally respected.

Narratives about different attitudes toward time among local residents were also repeatedly reported: Respondents described local people as exhibiting “laziness and occasional tardiness” (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023), noting that “if you agreed [to meet] with a lawyer at 10:00, you shouldn’t expect him before 14:00” (male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023). Many described the everyday pace as relaxed, “everything here is chill, a kind of Kazakh siesta” (male, 21, Almaty, September 14, 2023), and observed that local Russians shared this more laid-back rhythm, while young relocants were accustomed to acting faster and more efficiently. Such temporal dissonance further complicated everyday interactions and contributed to feelings of cultural distance.

Other migrants similarly noted inconsistencies with local norms, often related to religion and gender roles. One female respondent remarked: “One of the disadvantages is a culture that I may not understand. It’s more conservative than Russian culture. For example, in Orthodox Christianity you’re also supposed to cover your head when you get married, but no one really does. Here I see many women in hijabs, and that makes it a bit harder to integrate” (female, 22, Almaty, August 23, 2023). The conservative character of Kazakhstani society led her to consider returning to Russia after the conflict or emigrating to Sweden, her husband’s home country. For most young Russians, religion plays no significant role in daily life, nor do they plan to transmit Orthodoxy, the dominant Russian faith, to future generations.

Thus, cultural and social differences between the local society and the culture of origin play a key role in choosing an appropriate adaptation strategy. Often, respondents prefer a strategy of separation from the host society. Despite the prevalence of the use of the Russian language in everyday communication in Kazakhstan

and the two countries' shared Soviet legacy, the customs and social norms of the local society turned out to be distant and unacceptable for some respondents: "These traditions are not close to me. For example, at weddings they invite 300 people, with festivities lasting for days. Men sit at one table, women at another. I don't like it, I don't understand it, but it's their business. Still, seeing all this, I realize I'd have difficulties if I dated a Kazakh girl from a traditional family" (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023).

These observations confirm earlier findings that young Russians tend to identify with European culture and liberal values. They see little reason to learn Kazakh or form long-term relationships with locals: "There's such a linguistic environment here for Russians that there's no need to learn Kazakh if you're a relocant and work remotely" (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023). In addition to cultural differences, the desire for further emigration to other countries is also due to economic reasons, since, according to respondents, renting housing in Almaty is quite expensive (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023; male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023). Given the liminality of the migrants' situation and the instability of the international situation, we can assume that they are trying to lead a cosmopolitan lifestyle without forming close ties to their place of residence, maintaining the myth of temporary displacement.

At the same time, some respondents express a desire and interest in studying the culture of the host society, including the Kazakh language, because, as they explain, "it's not convenient sometimes . . . and in principle I wanted to study it, since I'm here" (male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023). Some are curious to study Kazakh history (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023); others prefer local music and films (male, 26, Almaty, August 19, 2023) and are interested in Kazakh traditions. Often, it is the respondents who show interest in local culture who plan to stay in Kazakhstan in the long term, bringing their families here, obtaining a residence permit, and getting a permanent job. The preference for a strategy of integration into the host society is explained by the personal situations of the respondents, in this case family responsibilities and the need to care for children, or to find suitable work in the local labor market.

Communication among relocants occurs mainly within the circle of fellow emigrants and within the Russian-speaking community. Russian emigrants distinguish local Russians from themselves: "Maybe their speech is a little different [with] more Kazakh intonations" (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023); "they have something of the Russian mentality, but everyone is different early on; it's clear that the locals [Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis] have adapted to [these differences]" (male, 26, Almaty, August 29, 2023); "we have common interests, regarding political views; maybe they are less politically involved, but in general they are close people in their views and understanding of life" (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023). On the other hand, "local Russians, for the most part, support the current policy of Russia, as it seemed to me. It's a little off-putting, but not significant. In principle, for me, there is nothing wrong with this. . . . But this nuance blocks the possibility of discussion of certain topics" (male, 30, Almaty, September 5, 2023).

Relocants' interactions with the Kazakhstani state primarily revolve around the need to resolve bureaucratic issues related to their stay in the country. Here they note mainly the prevalence of corrupt practices: "Sometimes this can be the lesser of evils, depending on the situation. For example, I managed to obtain a temporary residence permit here through some corrupt means" (male, 27, Almaty, August 14, 2023). According to another respondent attempting to get a legal residence permit, "they told me right away—1,350,000 [tenge] on the table if you want no problems. Of course, I didn't have that kind of money" (male, 30, Almaty, August 28, 2023). These experiences surprised many, revealing the prevalence of informal practices in everyday life.

In participating in the local political and social life, Russian relocants have a rather passive and waiting position: "I think I would like to, but so far I don't participate. I attribute this to the fact that I basically have two jobs now, and I concentrated on earning the maximum possible amount of money in order to move somewhere else and exist, but I was thinking about it" (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023). This phenomenon is influenced by the local political context and already known cases of persecution of Russian activists (journalist Evgeniia Baltatarova*, Tula activist Andrei Pavlov [KazTAG 2023], Igor Sandzhiev [Radio Azattyk† 2023a], Natal'ia Narskaia and Aikhal Ammosov [Radio Azattyk† 2024], Mikhail Zhilin [Radio Azattyk† 2023b]). Following the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia, the government of Kazakhstan stated that it would not extradite Russians fleeing mobilization; however, the status of political activists within this framework has been ambiguous.

Russian relocants in Kazakhstan also encountered challenges similar to those they had faced in Russia, although many felt "much freer" there than in their home country (male, 27, Almaty, August 15, 2023): "There are also quite big political problems here. Society is too detached from politics; you can feel it. They think that it does not concern them. But I think that they already have an example of a neighboring country, and this will all be corrected in the future" (male, 25, Almaty, September 7, 2023).

On the other hand, during the Russian presidential elections in 2024, emigrated Russians actively participated in the opposition action Noon Against Putin. Participants were encouraged to arrive at polling stations at noon to vote for any candidate other than the incumbent or to spoil their ballots. On election day, long queues formed at the Russian diplomatic missions in Astana and Almaty. According to exit poll data, only 9 percent of Russian citizens who took part in the elections in Almaty voted for Vladimir Putin; Putin's opponent Vladislav Davankov received 69 percent of the vote. In Astana, relocants similarly rejected Putin's candidacy, either voting for Davankov or invalidating their ballots (KazTAG 2024). This unusually low support drew the Kremlin's attention, prompting plans to establish a registry of relocants in Kazakhstan to monitor emigrants and prevent the creation of anti-Russian organizations. Apparently, such a registry would record emigrants' political views and attitudes toward the regime in their home country (KazTAG 2024).

Some emigrants had experience taking a political position in Russia, for example, going to protests organized by Alexei Navalny's[§] Anti-Corruption Foundation*[§], signing petitions, or participating in civic organizations. However, most of them did not have the time or opportunity to express their political views in Russia due to their young age or geographical distance from the center. On the other hand, they would not mind participating in any activities in the host country, but do not see currently any opportunities in Kazakhstan, do not have free time for this due to working multiple jobs, or feel insecure about publicly criticizing the Russian government in the local context. Despite the fact that there are local organizations and communities in the host country that provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, emigrants from Russia are attracted to the actions initiated within the relocant environment. For example, the drummer from the popular protest group Bi-2,² Boris Lifshits presented his debut video in August 2023 in Almaty, where he had emigrated shortly before. The presentation brought together visiting relocants from Russia and local Russians, who supported not only the band's creative work, but also their political views.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of young Russian migrants in Kazakhstan following the 2022 partial mobilization show that migration reflects political opposition, moral principles, and pragmatic considerations, shaping both the strategies migrants adopt and their ongoing engagement with their country of origin. Applying the exit, voice, and loyalty framework reveals that, for many, emigration functioned as a form of moral and political exit from an increasingly repressive state, without resulting in a complete break with their homeland. Physical departure did not imply disengagement: Respondents continued to follow events in Russia, maintain emotional and social ties, participate in discussions about its future, and feel a sense of responsibility for what was happening. These findings complement existing research (Hoffmann 2008; Burgess 2012; Helms 2024), demonstrating that such "exit without rupture" generates more flexible and dynamic forms of loyalty and voice than those suggested by the classical interpretation of the model.

The adaptation strategies of young Russian migrants in Kazakhstan following the 2022 partial mobilization were shaped by their motivations, political orienta-

[§] Здесь и далее [§] указывает на то, что отмеченные организации/лица внесены в формируемый Росфинмониторингом перечень организаций и физических лиц, в отношении которых имеются сведения об их причастности к экстремистской деятельности или терроризму. (From here on, [§] indicates that the denoted organizations/individuals are included in the list of organizations and individuals, compiled by the Federal Financial Monitoring Service of the Russian Federation, regarding which there is information about their involvement in extremism or terrorism.)

² Members of the Belarusian-Russian rock band Bi-2 have recently become an opposition group and repeatedly expressed their anti-Putin rhetoric through (the band's lead singer, Leva Bi-2 [Egor Bortnik*], has been designated as a "foreign agent" under Russian law). They also emigrated from Russia almost immediately after the start of the full-scale military operation.

tions, and individual dispositions. These strategies unfolded as a fluid and context-dependent process, combining pragmatic steps, such as securing legal status or employment, with selective social and cultural adjustments. While cultural and linguistic proximity facilitated initial settlement, it did not guarantee full integration, requiring migrants to negotiate continuously between a sense of belonging and the experience of liminality.

At the same time, considerable heterogeneity emerged within the migrant group itself. Some distanced themselves from the host society, remaining primarily within Russian-speaking or expatriate circles and viewing Kazakhstan as a temporary refuge before a potential move to third countries. Others sought more stable rootedness—learning the language, entering the labor market, and establishing family and social ties. The study revealed that a migrant's life circumstances, such as having a partner, stable employment, or children, significantly shaped adaptation strategies, prompting migrants to make more pragmatic and long-term decisions about their lives in the new country. Despite these differences, participation in Kazakhstan's public and political life remained limited. This can be explained both by migrants' continued orientation toward the Russian information agenda and by the host state's cautious approach toward politically active newcomers, given the predominantly political nature of their migration.

These findings deepen our understanding of how temporary and uncertain relocation shapes everyday decision-making, social engagement, and the formation of life strategies. This study contributes to the growing body of research on post-2022 Russian emigration by examining it in a new historical and geographical context—Kazakhstan—and providing valuable comparative material for analyzing migration dynamics. The case of young Russian migrants demonstrates that post-2022 mobility is not only a reaction to political pressure but also a process of rethinking identity, citizenship, and moral responsibility.

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БЕГСТВО МОЛОДЫХ РОССИЯН В КАЗАХСТАН: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ВЗГЛЯДЫ И ОТНОШЕНИЯ С ПРИНИМАЮЩИМ ОБЩЕСТВОМ И ГОСУДАРСТВОМ

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Публикация статьи поддержана проектом SVV Института международных исследований Факультета социальных наук Карлова университета в Праге (№ 260844).

Через почти четыре года после начала полномасштабного вторжения России в Украину сотни тысяч российских эмигрантов рассредоточены по разным частям мира. Казахстан стал одним из ключевых направлений этой волны эмиграции благодаря географической близости, языковой доступности и относительно открытому миграционному режиму. В статье представлен анализ интервью с молодыми российскими эмигрантами, переехавшими в Казахстан после начала российского вторжения в Украину в 2022 году. Исследуется, как мигранты формулируют свои мотивы выезда из России, политические взгляды и размышления о внутренней политике России и военных действиях на территории Украины. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как политическая позиция и личные жизненные обстоятельства влияют на повседневный опыт мигрантов и их стратегии адаптации.

Статья анализирует, как мигранты взаимодействуют с принимающим государством и обществом, а также как они ориентируются в правовых и институциональных рамках. Применяя модель «выход, голос и лояльность», исследование показывает, что эмиграция часто функционирует как моральный и политический выход без полного разрыва с родиной. Стратегии адаптации сочетают прагматические, социальные и культурные меры в зависимости от контекста и отличаются разнообразием.

Ключевые слова: молодые россияне; мигранты; релоканты; идентичность; политические взгляды; стратегии адаптации; Казахстан