

# Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War on Ukraine

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Korableva, Ekaterina; Jonutyté, Kristina; Silvan, Kristiina

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## Migrants from Russia in Georgia during the War in Ukraine: Political Performance and the “Unpredictable Border”

Ekaterina Korableva (Center for Independent Social Research, Berlin)

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### Abstract:

In this article, I explore Georgia as a destination for Russian political activists in exile and under prosecution. Since 2021, Tbilisi has become a sanctuary for an increasing number of people fleeing different forms of state violence in the Russian Federation. Among Russian citizens, the city has gained a reputation as a hub for those who oppose Putin’s regime and the war in Ukraine. The everyday informal bordering produced by different actors in Tbilisi has also pushed migrants to engage in particular forms of political performance. However, as of 2023 the situation seems to be changing: some exiled activists are discovering that the visa-free regime that allowed them to come in the first place actually limits their freedom of movement and action.

### Leaving Russia

The full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that the Russian government started in February 2022 was the final straw for many activists, journalists, and civic actors who had previously struggled to oppose Putin’s authoritarianism from within the country. Along with many workers in the IT and creative sectors, as well as other more mobile or resourceful groups of people, activists from Russia chose the visa-free countries as their destinations for urgent evacuation. In spring 2022, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Serbia—among other countries—received the first influx of war-induced migration from Russia.

When making the decision to move, many of those interviewed had told themselves that they were leaving only for a few months to wait out and navigate the violent changes. By the summer of 2022—the time of the first interviews—they planned to stay for around 6 months. The unplanned and enforced nature of their departure, coupled with extreme uncertainty about the future and the increasingly stringent visa regulations for Russian citizens in Europe, motivated migrants to take up at least temporary residence in countries with lenient migration policies.

### Migrating to Georgia

Migrants interviewed in Batumi and Tbilisi had primarily chosen between Armenia and Georgia as their destination. This established a new mobility pattern between the countries and sparked new narratives by migrants about these places. Often, when explaining why they had chosen Tbilisi, migrants would refer to

their stay in Yerevan, and vice versa. Considerations that played a role in migrants’ decisions to settle in Georgia were access, safety, viability, familiarity, comfort, and networking potential. Tbilisi was one of the few places migrants could physically reach—via a land border with Russia, as well as exorbitantly priced yet uninterrupted air connections to countries that neighbor Georgia. In addition, Georgia attracted migrants due to the persistence of a Russian-speaking environment and perceived affordability. Many had a positive image of the country from previous trips, as well as friends in the city who had already emigrated there. The liberal migration regime played a major role, as it allowed Russian citizens with an international passport a year-long visa-free stay that could be restarted by a “visa run,”<sup>1</sup> as well as the ability to work in the country legally.

In 2022, the Georgian officials reported that 112,000 Russian citizens had entered and were staying in the country. Surveys show that this migration consists largely of young, educated, and qualified people from large Russian cities, with incomes higher than the Russian average (Kuleshova et al, 2023; *Exodus 2022*, 2023). While IT workers constituted the most noticeable group, in spring 2022 Georgia seemed like a particularly desirable destination for those who were politically active. Compared to other accessible countries, Georgia was perceived as “free” and “more European,” with a civil society that vocally condemned the war in Ukraine. Georgia already hosted a “zero wave”<sup>2</sup> of political migrants from Russia, who arrived after the annexation of Crimea and during the pre-war purges of the political opposition, as well as an influx of people from

1 A brief trip out of the country and back in order to restart the clock on the time an individual is allowed to stay in the country.

2 Those who arrived in Georgia immediately following the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine—in the spring of 2022—are frequently labeled as “the first wave.” Those who came following the partial mobilization of military reservists—in the fall of 2022—are described as “the second wave.”

Belarus fleeing the state aggression in their country. The new political migrants could therefore rely on the support of their precursors, network, and build infrastructure together. Many appreciated the absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia—those who had risked or experienced prosecution in Russia often repeated the phrase “Georgia won’t extradite.”

### Infrastructure for Activism

The lack of migration regulation, combined with the ease of settling down and opening organizations in Georgia, initially created a favorable environment for migrants to establish new infrastructure and social networks that could respond rapidly to the unfolding crisis. Migrants who were already involved in translocal initiatives kept working remotely without losing much time in the “bureaucratic quest” to gain legal status in the new country. At the same time, a localized network of shelters, community centers, humanitarian organizations, support channels, and educational spaces sprang up. The activists pursued several main avenues of activities:

- 1) supporting the anti-war and anti-regime efforts in Russia—helping political prisoners, anti-war agitation, journalism, helping men evade the military draft, democratic education, solidarity campaigns, etc.
- 2) helping Ukrainian causes and Ukrainian refugees—fundraising, humanitarian aid, and evacuations (in contrast to other activities, the teams engaged in such initiatives proved to be very international).
- 3) assisting fellow migrants—generally speaking, neither the Georgian state nor the civil society recognized the new arrivals from Russia as a vulnerable group. Migrants themselves therefore made significant efforts to help and orient new migrants in distress, like the draft-evaders who arrived *en masse* through the land border at Verkhny Lars in the fall of 2022 (Lomsadze, 2022.)
- 4) learning about and solidarizing with Georgian causes—an endeavor apparently specific to the post-colonial context. In an effort to be respectful to their host society, which has severe historical grievances against Russia and, as recently as 2008, went through a war with Russia, migrants organized walks, rallies, eco-projects, study groups, and lectures related to Georgian history, culture, and perspective on conflicts. Topics related to imperialism and decolonization gained a lot of momentum. A rare (if not the only) free Georgian language and culture course, initiated by migrants and run by a Georgian NGO, had eight interested people per place available, reflecting a high demand among migrants from Russia to learn about Georgia.

### The Issue of Visibility

Migrants with more entrepreneurial skills opened bars, cafes, studios, and bookstores. To show solidarity, they often decorated them with Ukrainian, Georgian, and white-blue-white flags, and placed donation boxes to raise money for Ukrainian refugees on the counter. Those who opened these businesses took pride in the opportunity to pay taxes in Georgia and not in Russia. However, they mostly hired fellow migrants and found few clients among the locals (Kuleshova et al., 2023). A large share of these businesses were centrally located and operated only in Russian and English, which soon began to cause tensions with some Georgian citizens and activists (Kucera, 2023).

Many Georgians started to associate the new migrants from Russia less with the anti-war and anti-Putin struggle, and more with wartime tourism and leisure (Lomsadze, 2023)—with expensive “Russian places” packed with middle-class digital workers and scandals involving people from Russia that went viral on media (e.g., Rizzo, 2023). Indeed, the active social life of the political migrant from Russia in Tbilisi involved little communication or collaboration with local civil society. This was due to the mass character of the migration, which made it easy for migrants to form a community with “their own,” as well as the migrants’ uncertain status and (often) feelings of guilt or shame about Russia’s connection to imperial history, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the lingering legacy of conflict with Georgia. Navigating the uneasy moral landscape of the time, some activists from Russia chose to refrain from publicity and communication with their Georgian counterparts as an ethical strategy. Interactions between the two civil societies were further limited by distancing on part of the Georgians (Tsaava, 2023).

The question of denomination and self-designation of migrants from Russia is particularly relevant. Their mobility has occurred in parallel with the large-scale displacement of people from war-torn Ukraine, more than 8 million of whom are on the move (*United Nations*, 2023). In Georgia, however, newcomers from Russia outnumber those who arrive from Ukraine (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022.) Matters are further complicated by the ongoing struggle of the internally displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region (*United Nations*, 2023), as well as the history of Russian tourism in Georgia, xenophobia in Russia, and the issue of class.

While there is a relative consensus that the term “refugee” describes the situation of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, migrants from Russia seem to be rather fluid in their description of their condition. Some resort to the neologism “relocant” or try to blend in with Tbilisi’s international crowd of “expats.” That being said, one IT

worker shared that, since he had heard that “rich white people created the word ‘expat’ to separate themselves from labor migrants,” he only called himself an “**emigrant**.” Simultaneously, the most vulnerable migrants from Russia I interviewed—those who worked the hardest and most precarious jobs, took out loans, did not know English, and struggled with severe depression—called themselves “expats.”

The phrase “**economic migrant**,” when employed in relation to this migration in Georgia, takes on a new, often negative connotation. While it has expectedly developed in opposition to the terms “political migrant” and “refugee,” in Georgia it has become associated with *economic privilege*—with middle-class cafes and fancy promotions on social media—and has been linked to the question of visibility and performance.

### The Border within the City

The anxiety and traumas that the war has brought to the surface, along with skyrocketing prices, the polarization of domestic politics, and a lack of meaningful communication with incoming migrants, have created tangible tension in Georgia’s largest cities. The deregulation of various sectors (migration, the rental market, tourism industry, small business registration) has made this encounter even more complicated. In the media, a lot of concern has therefore been expressed about the permeability of the Russian-Georgian border (*The Village*, 2022; *Civil.ge*, 2023; *Ekho Kavkaza*, 2023; Kirby, Paul, 2022.) Calls for introducing a visa regime with Russia have found significant support among Georgians (*Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 2022; *CRRC Georgia*, 2022.) The Russian authorities, on the other hand, have taken steps to facilitate mobility between the countries—introducing a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens and resuming the direct air routes that had been halted in 2019 (*The Associated Press*, 2023.)

In this climate, a dynamic, *insurgent border* has emerged, most prominently in Tbilisi—a decentralized border produced by civil, private, and individual actors. This everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019) has manifested itself in the war- and migration-related graffiti that has covered the city center (Kucera, 2023), in the politicization of the Russian language among Georgian youth, and in the impromptu “visas” and “sanctions” that private businesses—from banks and landlords to techno clubs—have created in order to filter out migrants with undesirable political stances. This border has emerged in small talk and exchanges between migrants and locals, as well as in ways migrants have marked themselves as being among the “respectful” or “desirable” ones (through language practices and visual markers).

An example of an “insurgent visa” for Russian citizens created by the team of Dedaena bar, Tbilisi. The full form, which Russian citizens need to fill out before visiting the bar, can be found on their website (<https://dedaenabar.ge/for-russians>, accessed September 8, 2023).

## / Visa For Citizens Of Russia

### Registration Form

Citizens Of Russia Need A VISA To Enter Dedaena Bar Because Not ALL Russians Are Welcome. We Stand For Equality And Unity, But We Need To Make Sure, That Brainwashed Russian Imperialists Do Not End Up In Our Bar. Please Support Us By Filling Up A VISA Application, So Nobody Has To Hang Out Alongside Asa\*Oles. Thanks For Understanding.

Name \* \_\_\_\_\_ Surname \* \_\_\_\_\_

I Am A Citizen Of Russia Visiting Georgia. Having Respect For My Host Country And Its People, I Agree To Following:

- I Didn't Vote For Putin, He Is A Dictator
- I Condemn Russian Aggression In Ukraine
- Crimea Is Ukraine, So Are Other Disputed Territories
- Abkhazia And Tskhinvali Regions Are Georgia
- 20% Of Georgia Are Occupied By Russia
- Every 12th Georgian Turned Into A Refugee Due To Russian Invasion
- I Like The Phrase "Russkii Voennii Karabi, Idi Na Xu!"
- Slava Ukraini!

I Understand That Dedaena Bar Is A Friendly And Tolerant Place And Visa Policy Had Been Implemented Due To A Delicate Political Situation And Some "Bad" Russians Who Misbehaved In Dedaena Bar.

I Have Read Through General Code Of Behavior:

- Please Understand, After Crossing Georgian Border, You Are In A Foreign Country, Act Accordingly

An example of one of many contested urban texts related to migration from Russia on the walls of central Tbilisi. This particular graffiti remained for at least several months, with additions and corrections by different authors. Photo taken by the author, 2023.



Despite these daily experiences, most of the interviewed migrants described their stay in Georgia as largely “safe and comfortable” and testified to encountering little to no aggression or discrimination. However, the visa-free regime that had initially allowed Russian citizens to enter Georgia *en masse* and remain in the country without assuming any formal status soon proved to be limiting their freedom of movement.

### The “Unpredictable Border”

Since summer 2022, an increasing number of cases of migrants being turned away at the Georgian border gained media attention in migrant circles. People doing “visa runs” or traveling for leisure or professional purposes were being denied entry to Georgia with no explanation. The logic behind this profiling remained ambiguous: the border guards did not reveal the reasons for non-admission, and neither permanent residency, employment, property ownership, nor the presence of dependents in the country seemed to exempt migrants from these risks.

In March 2023, a local migrant media outlet published instructions for preparing to cross the Georgian border with the risk of not being re-admitted (*Paper Kartuli*, 2023):

- take all your documents
- pack your belongings so that they can be shipped
- give friends a copy of your key
- find a lawyer

This situation motivated some migrants to cancel their trips abroad and some considered taking the risk of overstaying the allowed visa-free period. Upon realizing that legalization<sup>3</sup> in the country was also complicated (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022), many decided to start looking for yet another home elsewhere. Those who had previously felt optimistic about settling in Georgia became less motivated to learn the language and make other attempts to integrate.

In Georgia, there is known to be systemic border violence against Russian citizens from the North Caucasus. Reports also reveal persistent discrimination against people from South Asian and African countries. In the case of Russian citizens from other regions, Belarusian, and even Ukrainian nationals, non-admission at the border seems to affect people with various backgrounds and connections to the country (*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*, 2022). Some who were initially turned away have found ways to return with the help of human rights NGOs. One journalist testifies to having returned to Georgia simply by waiting and experimenting with different routes.

Yet among migrants from Russia, this deregulated border regime became firmly associated with media presence and opposition activities. As various journalists, human rights workers, and “foreign agents” were turned back when trying to enter the country (Bregvadze, 2023), rumors that the FSB had provided special lists to the Georgian border police spread among migrant communities. For some migrants, these rumors influenced not only their migration plans, but also their decisions regarding political activity. Increased publicity around activism or participation in street politics became associated with potential immobility or further displacement.

The non-transparent bordering with Russia, observed on different levels, affects Georgian society. “It is also unpredictable where [this border] is. Because we don’t actually know,” comments urban planner Elena Darjania, implicitly referring, among other things, to the issue of illegal borderization along the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region (Amnesty International, 2019.) Darjania adds: “We have upcoming elections and I see a lot of discussion that this election can also be perceived as a border.” Georgia’s parliamentary elections of 2024, among other things, may change the current party’s course on maintaining the status quo in relation to the war-induced migration from Russia. The tangible anxiety and fear surrounding the migration process that is felt in parts of Georgian society may also be manipulated during the upcoming political campaigns.

### Moving On

All the complexities described above invite us to look more closely at how the visa-free regime between Russia and Georgia actually operates and what social effects it breeds. What first appeared to some as an “open border” proved to be an unpredictable, deregulated border capable of limiting both migrants’ mobility and their agency. At the same time, the border as a *process* and *experience* transcends state lines and permeates the capital city. With its insurgent nature—perpetuated in texts, speech acts and practices—it is invoked by various actors who are not part of the military or the state.

Tbilisi, as one of the centers of Russian political migration, is slowly losing its reputation as a safe destination for the most vocal opponents of the war and the political regime in Russia. For political activists, the most common avenue to further mobility is a humanitarian visa to Germany. In order to apply, one needs to be a member of a group at risk, prove discrimination or

3 It is not only those trying to obtain residence permits who struggle with the non-transparency of Georgian migration policy, but also those eligible and ready to apply for Georgian citizenship (Akhaltskha.net, 2023).

prosecution in Russia, and show ties to German organizations. This has inspired the curious practice among Russian citizens of gathering their “opposition portfolios,” while those activists who are less institutionalized or lack qualifying experiences feel somewhat excluded.

To be *accepted* both in Georgia and in Germany, Russian citizens need to demonstrate both their political

stance and that they have exercised agency in opposing the war in Ukraine and the Putin regime. However, what could be *performed* in Tbilisi requires documentary evidence at the more bureaucratized border with the European Union. One may perhaps hope that the EU border only needs crossing once, at least for a while. Life in Tbilisi, in its unique and specific forms, requires it daily.

#### *About the Author:*

*Ekaterina Korableva* is a social researcher and interdisciplinary practitioner at the Center for Independent Social Research. This research was conducted with the support of the Center for Independent Social Research, Berlin.

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## ANALYSIS

## Buryatia and Buryats in Light of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Kristina Jonutyte (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas)

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### Abstract

This paper looks at how the Russo-Ukrainian war has affected Buryatia and Buryats, as well as what this might mean for the future of the region. Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group who have historically been split across three countries: Russia, Mongolia, and China. Based on the available data, it appears that Buryats and/or soldiers from Buryatia are overrepresented among casualties on the Russian side. The article explores this overrepresentation and local reactions thereto, placing these grievances in historical context.

The war in Ukraine has escalated discussions of ethnic identity and belonging among ethnic minority populations in the Russian Federation. Many are redefining what it means to be an ethnic minority in Russia and their place in the country's social and political fabric. Official Russian discourse emphasizes unity between the three Eastern Slavic peoples: Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. While the Russian state has waged a war to realize this vision, its non-Slavic minorities are debating their place in the Slavic-dominated nation. These debates are important and consequential for the present and the future of the Russian Federation. Ethnic minority citizens constitute around one-fifth of the population of Russia. In terms of territory, 26 of Russia's 83 internationally recognized federal subjects are political units that have historically been governed by indigenous and/or ethnic minority groups (of which

21 are republics, 1 is an autonomous oblast, and 4 are autonomous okrugs).

On the one hand, the Russo-Ukrainian war has facilitated deeper integration of minorities into Russia. Many have sacrificed their lives for the country or endured war and sanctions-related effects such as restricted international mobility. A disproportionate share of Russia's casualties appear to come from minority regions; they also appear to be overrepresented in military drafting.<sup>1</sup> Some seek to justify these losses using the Russian state's official narratives, making a concerted effort to increase the connection of ethnic minorities to the state. To give just one striking example, in a speech in the early days of the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin commemorated a deceased Lak lieutenant, granting him the title of Hero of Russia: "When I see examples of such heroism, like the feat of the young man Nurmagomed

<sup>1</sup> According to data from August 24, 2023, Buryatia has the fifth-highest official casualty rate in Russia (898). It is the second-highest casualty rate when accounting for the size of the region's population. Much more populous Moscow has 309 casualties, while St. Petersburg has 305. "Russian Casualties in Ukraine," *Mediazona*, accessed August 4, 2023, [https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/20/casualties\\_eng](https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/20/casualties_eng).



Gadzhimagomedov, born in Dagestan, of Lak ethnicity, and our other soldiers, I want to say, I am Lak, I am Dagestani, I am Chechen, Ingush, Russian, Tatar, Jewish, Mordvin, Ossetian” (“Vladimir Putin’s speech during the Security Council meeting, 2022, my translation).

On the other hand, the war has sparked oppositional movements among ethnic minorities of Russia, including Buryats, Tuvans, and Chechens. They debate and question their place in Russia for a number of reasons, among them the higher casualty counts and higher conscription rates in some ethnic minority regions; the racism and structural discrimination they have long experienced in Russia; and the traumatic history of Russian colonization that they share with Ukrainians. A wide range of minority political and cultural movements have emerged or gained strength since the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022. Although they are based in the diaspora because of the illiberal climate and the criminalization of oppositional politics in Russia, some of these organizations also have anonymous contributors and volunteers within Russia. The reach of these anti-war and other political and cultural diasporic organizations within Russia is unclear. However, my interlocutors in Ulaanbaatar in autumn 2022, who fled Russia after the “partial mobilization” was announced on September 21, 2022, were well aware of the activities of some of these organizations, such as the Free Buryatia Foundation. Even though some considered their activists to be out of touch with the current situation in Buryatia, they nonetheless quoted the Free Buryatia Foundation’s data analyses and statistics and discussed—if sometimes critically—its use of decolonial vocabulary with respect to Buryatia.

In what follows, I look at how the war has affected Buryatia and Buryats, as well as what this might mean for the future of the region.<sup>2</sup>

### Buryatia Past and Present

The Republic of Buryatia is a multiethnic, multi-religious region in the Far Eastern district of Russia (it was until 2018 part of the Siberian Federal District). It borders Mongolia to the south and incorporates Lake Baikal on its western side. Its population is approaching one million, while its territory is similar in size to that of Germany. The capital city of the Republic is Ulan-Ude, which boasts almost 440,000 inhabitants. Demographically, the indigenous group of Buryats constitute around one-third of the population. Ethnic Russians make up most of the remaining inhabitants, while Evenks, Soyots, and others are represented in much smaller numbers.

Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group who have historically been split across three countries: Russia (more than 460,000), Mongolia (almost 44,000) and China (approx. 10,000). Within Russia, they have historically resided not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in what is now Irkutsk oblast (almost 75,000) and Zabaykalskii krai (over 65,000). Buryat lands were colonized during the Russian eastward expansion: the Udinskoe fort was established in 1666 and later became the town Verkhneudinsk (now Ulan-Ude). In the official version of Russian history, the process by which the Buryat population and lands were incorporated into Russia is portrayed as voluntary accession. Yet numerous historians highlight its violent and involuntary nature.

The Buryats’ imperial history includes several especially tragic periods. In fact, Buryat outmigration waves to Mongolia and China were the result of tensions with the Russian authorities. These transborder migrations increased in the early twentieth century. One large wave of outmigration was related to the Russian Revolution and the new Bolshevik power, another to collectivization and the Stalinist repressions. In the Soviet Union, Buryats suffered the consequences of dekulakization, collectivization, and forced settlement (having previously nomadized) in the late 1920s and 1930s. The Stalinist repressions were detrimental to the Buryat population in the Soviet Union: on top of dekulakisation and political charges, many were also charged with pan-Mongolism and ties to Japan and suffered through anti-religious repressions. In parallel with this loss of lives and livelihoods, the Buryat language and culture were in many ways undermined and devalued during the Soviet decades. At the same time, the Soviet period did bring great educational and economic advancement. Historian Melissa Chakars (2014) refers to the Buryats as the “model minority” of the USSR and a Soviet success story, as representatives of the group advanced rapidly in Soviet society. As the USSR dissolved, 85 percent of Buryatia’s voters wished to preserve the union—a share 10 percent higher than the Union average (Chakars 2014: 256).

While early post-Soviet Russia saw cultural and religious revivals, the space for cultural sovereignty and political autonomy has shrunk over the years, especially during Putin’s rule. In Buryatia, many activists speak of the 2008 consolidation (Rus. *ukrupnenie*) in the region—whereby Ust’-Orda Autonomous Okrug was joined with Irkutsk oblast’ and Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug was joined with Chita oblast (subsequently renamed Zabaykalskii krai)—as a watershed moment in local politics. Having previously constituted a large part of the popula-

2 This text is based on one month of ethnographic field research in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, split between October 2022 and July 2023, with those who fled Buryatia following the “partial mobilization,” as well as online research and my previous long-term ethnographic research in Buryatia since 2015 on the topics of identity, religion, and collective representation.

tion of the Autonomous Okrugs, which accorded them more substantial minority self-governance, Buryats are now a small minority in the Russian-dominated oblasts. With the merger, they lost powers including budget allocations, local dumas, and having their own representatives in the Russian federal duma. Diminished minority language rights are also an important aspect of what is locally experienced as increased Russification: since 2017, minority languages have become an optional subject and their teaching in schools must be limited to a maximum of two hours per week.

### Buryats and the Russo-Ukrainian War

During the war in Ukraine, Buryats have suffered both a seemingly disproportionate casualty count on the Russian side and disproportionate misrepresentation as some of the main and cruelest perpetrators of the invasion. To start with the latter point, many media and social media accounts have reproduced the myth of “Putin’s combative Buryats” (Rus. *boevye buryaty Putina*), a racist label that has roots in the 2014 invasion of East Ukraine and is often used for any Russian Asian soldiers. Buryat participation in the war and their supposed extreme cruelty and thievery there have been the subject of racist discussions in the Russian and international media. Even the Pope has named Buryats, along with Chechens, as the cruelest soldiers on the Russian side, contrasting them to those “of the Russian tradition” (The Editors 2022).

According to data analysis by the Free Buryatia Foundation from March 23, 2023, Buryatia is the region of Russia with the third-highest overall casualty count (546) and second-highest casualty count per capita (55.6 per 100,000). It is also the region with the third-highest rate of casualties among the mobilized, both overall (81) and per capita (8.2 for each 100,000). The organization further reports that inhabitants of Buryatia are mobilized 2.5 to 3 times more often than the Russian average and that the number of deaths among mobilized persons from Buryatia is more than a hundred times higher than that of mobilized persons from Moscow (Free Buryatia Foundation, March 29, 2023). These statistics refer to inhabitants of the region rather than solely ethnic Buryats, but based on preliminary data, ethnic Buryats appear to be slightly overrepresented in the Russian army: they constitute around 0.6 percent of the Russian army but only 0.34 percent of the Russian population (Vyushkova & Sherkhonov 2023: 133).

My Buryat interlocutors in Ulaanbaatar were well aware of Buryatia’s disproportionate losses but held differing opinions as to whether this was attributable to ethnic, economic, or other factors. Just as Buryats themselves debate the disparities in fatality count, so too do social scientists. Sociologist Alexey Bessudnov (2023: 883) argues that the overrepresentation of members of

some ethnic minority groups among the casualties is due to the poor socioeconomic standing of these regions: “When regional socioeconomic disparities are accounted for, ethnic differences in mortality rates are considerably reduced.” Considering ethnic minorities and Russians from the same region, Bessudnov (2023: 892) claims, in most regions there is little difference in the fatality count. However, he determines ethnicity by the person’s name, which makes for a conservative estimate, since many Buryats and other minorities have Russian names. In contrast, employing a more elaborate method for determining the ethnicity of casualties, Mariya Vyushkova and Evgeny Sherkhonov (2023: 134) find a substantial overrepresentation of ethnic Buryats in the casualty count of Buryatia (42.4 percent of casualties but 30 percent of the population), Zabaikal’skii krai (24.2 and 6.8 percent), and Irkutsk oblast’ (5.8 and 3.3 percent), the three regions with substantial indigenous Buryat populations. As they conclude, “For such Asian ethnicities as Buryats, Tuvans, and Kazakhs, the risk of dying in this war is several times greater than for ethnic Russians” (p. 136).

### Conclusion

What are the implications of the war in Ukraine for Buryatia and Buryats? First, the loss of lives will inevitably leave a mark on the region. Buryat activists and those in the diaspora are openly discussing the demographic consequences of the loss of many hundreds and potentially thousands of Buryat male lives—and what this means for the survival and continuity of the Buryat nation. Second, the war and the “partial mobilization” have resulted in substantial outmigration from Buryatia, as from elsewhere in Russia. Many have moved a few times since the “partial mobilization” took off in September 2022, for instance fleeing to Mongolia and then planning onward moves from there. Many have returned to Russia. Some of the main locations of the new Buryat diaspora are Mongolia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and the US, although many have fled to different locations in Europe, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. While some simply plan to wait out their period of potential conscription, many more will not be returning to Buryatia: often, they have already built families, found new careers, and established themselves abroad. Third, the losses of lives and livelihoods have caused the accumulation of grievances in the region, which pile on top of grievances regarding other tragic periods of Buryat history in Russia. This has led some to formulate an oppositional political opinion or undertake activism, while others remain undecided about the causes and consequences of the losses and the war in general. A number of substantial Buryat movements have emerged in the diaspora: some looking for independence and others sup-

porting federalism, but all striving toward democracy. It is impossible to know how much support they might have in Buryatia itself, as the illiberal Russian regime does not allow for the existence of different political visions and debate. In such a climate, opinion polls or

other estimations are inevitably flawed. What is clear, however, is that the current war constitutes a watershed moment in Buryat society that will shape Buryat identity and, with it, the future of the region.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. *Kristina Jonutyte* is a Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Center for Social Anthropology, Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). She is a social anthropologist interested in the topics of identity and ethnicity, political anthropology, Buryatia, Russia, and Inner Asia.

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## Central Asia in Russian Government-Affiliated Media Discourse

Kristiina Silvan (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki)

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### Abstract

This article contributes to the debate about Russia's past and present-day imperialism by studying the portrayal of Central Asia in expert discourse mediated by the Russian state-affiliated tabloid newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* from a critical geopolitical perspective. It argues that there are two separate discourses on Central Asia: a *foreign policy* discourse on Central Asian states and a *domestic policy* discourse on the Central Asian region. While the former narrates Central Asian states as Russia's partners, the latter constructs Central Asia as an inherently problematic region for Russia. Moreover, the term "Middle Asia" (*Sredniaia Aziia*) functions as a marker of the xenophobic domestic policy discourse, which is why those sensitive to the current decolonization imperative are triggered by its application.

On August 4, 2023, Alexei Navalny, perhaps contemporary Russia's most famous opposition politician, was sentenced to 19 years in prison on charges of extremism. A week later, he published an extended essay titled "My fear and loathing" (Navalny 2023). In this manifesto, he expresses profound disappointment with Russia's failure to democratize in the 1990s, claiming that "it was not with Putin in 2011 but with Yeltsin, Chubais, oligarchs, and the entire Komsomol-party gang that called themselves 'democrats' that we went not to Europe but to Central Asia in 1994" (Navalny 2023). Navalny's decision to juxtapose Europe with Central Asia sparked immediate outrage among the community of Central Asian scholars, experts, and activists. On her Twitter page, Nargis Kassenova (2023) interpreted Navalny's Central Asia as the "anti-Europe" — "underdeveloped, authoritarian and corrupt" — while many others (see, for example, Marat 2023) criticized Navalny's use of the term *Sredniaia Aziia* (literally "Middle Asia") instead of *Tsentral'naia Aziia* (literally "Central Asia") in the Russian-language version of the manifesto.

This was not the first time Navalny's public statements about Central Asia had been met with public criticism. However, the case illustrates the role of geographical claims and assumptions in political debates and political practice—a core focus of critical geopolitics (Kuus 2017)—and how such claims and assumptions are received in the contemporary context of both Russia's ongoing "colonial war" in Ukraine (Mälksoo 2022) and the decolonization movement in contemporary East European, Eurasian, Russian, and Slavonic studies.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it aims to respond to the collective call to decolonize the scholarly field by analyzing and deconstructing the discourse on Central Asia in expert discourse mediated by the popular Russian government-affiliated newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (*AiF*). Second, it seeks to explain why there is such resistance to using the term *Sredniaia Aziia*—or,

as Kassenova (2023) put it, "not the term we use in the region"—to refer to Central Asia. In so doing, the article aims to deconstruct and denormalize the Russian imperialist gaze toward the post-Soviet space (cf. Zayarnyuk 2022).

Analyzing the portrayal of Central Asia by those identified as "experts" in *AiF*, I argue for the construction of two separate discourses on Central Asia. On the one hand, there is a discourse about the *foreign policy* of Russia and the five Central Asian states. Although the discourse has some imperialist underpinnings (most notably the expectation of political loyalty and unity in opposition to Western influence—Kassymbekova & Marat 2022), it portrays the region in a predominantly positive light and recognizes the agency of the region's states. On the other hand, there is prominent discourse on Central Asia *in relation to* Russian domestic policy. This discourse, which narrates Central Asia as an imagined geographic and political space alien to Russia, portrays Central Asia in a very negative light, as a source of problems for Russia. Interestingly enough, these two discourses employ different terms when referring to Central Asia: *Tsentral'naia Aziia* is used in the foreign policy discourse, while *Sredniaia Aziia* is applied only in the domestic policy one.

Returning to the case of Alexei Navalny and the current political context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, I argue that it is one's (conscious or subconscious) awareness of the fact that the term "Middle Asia" belongs to the vocabulary of the domestic policy discourse on Central Asia that makes this choice of words triggering. Moreover, the debate on how Central Asia ought to be called in the Russian language is not taking place in a vacuum; rather, it is a part of a wider debate in which Russia's neighbors strive to have a say in determining how they are referred to in Russian: to be Belarus rather than Belorussia, Moldova instead of Moldavia, and Kyrgyzstan instead of Kirgizia (cf. Savchenko 2021).

### Critical Geopolitical Approach to Studying Central Asia in Expert Discourse and Media

Critical geopolitics, a subfield in the study of international relations, has traditionally been focused on the study of political actors' geographical assumptions and meanings, as well as the impact these have on world politics (Dodds & Sidaway 1994). Although the maturing of the subfield has led to a plethora of approaches (e.g., "banal," "feminist," "popular," "radical," "subaltern," and "liminal" geopolitics—Nishiyama 2019), significant attention continues to be paid to the deconstruction of geopolitical representations and processes (Bachmann & Moisiso 2020). Géaroid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew's (1992) initial call to analyze the way political actors "spatialize" international politics and represent it as a "world" characterized by certain kinds of places, peoples, and dramas has remained scholarship's general goal for the field of inquiry (Kuus, 2010). In turn, scholars of popular geopolitics (Sharp 1993, Bernazzoli 2010, Szostek 2017) have underscored the role of the media in circulating geopolitical ideas from political actors to wide audiences and back, thereby causing the exclusion of some geopolitical discourses and the elevation of others to positions of hegemony. Experts and their voice of authority have a key role in this process, which is why Dodds (1993, 71) calls them the "state's privileged story tellers."

Russia's perception of its neighborhood has been a popular topic for scholarly analysis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Applying a critical geopolitical toolkit to the study of Russian foreign policy, Foxall (2019) argues that Russian politicians' narrative of the EU underwent major change in the 2010s, while Omelicheva (2012) explains contradictions in Russia's foreign policy toward Iran through the lens of Russia's "geopolitics code." Meanwhile, the interpretation of Russia as a (neo)imperialist state has traveled from the margins of the academic and policy debate to the mainstream following Moscow's increasingly assertive foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the countries of the former Soviet Union from the mid-2000s onward (Sagramoso 2020). In recognizing the independence of Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, annexing Crimea, and launching a proxy war in Ukraine's Donbas region, Russia has become, for all intents and purposes, a revisionist state (Sagramoso 2020). Yet it was not until the full-scale war in Ukraine that a consensus about Russia's current imperialist outlook emerged in the scholarly community.

The research on Russian–Central Asian relations suggests that the current Russian elite has a two-fold attitude toward Central Asia. On the one hand, the region encompassing the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan has "always mattered to Moscow" due to its pivotal geo-

political location, considerable resources, and perceived security vulnerabilities (Omelicheva 2018). On the other hand, xenophobia and racism toward people of color are deeply entrenched in Russian society and are targeted particularly toward those who appear to be of Caucasian or Central Asian origin. Eraliev and Urinboyev (2020) argue that the Russian media play an active role in reinforcing racist tropes, shaping public opinion, and intensifying xenophobic attitudes toward migrants.

This article contributes to the literature on Russia's geopolitical imaginaries by studying the portrayal of Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and their societies in the media. Empirically, the analysis presented in this article draws from news articles published in the online version of the Russian media outlet *Argumenty i fakty*, a government-affiliated but commercially operating weekly owned by *Promsviazbank*. This outlet was chosen based on its high readership rate and accessibility via the Integrum database. Recognizing the hegemonic role of experts as knowledge producers, authoritative voices that convey supposedly reliable and non-biased information, my interest was in the "expert" narrative on the Central Asian region. Thus, the Russian-language keywords "Central Asia" (*Tsentral'naia Aziia*) and "Middle Asia" (*Sredniaia Aziia*) were used in combination with the word "expert" (*ekspert*), generating a sample that was comprehensible yet manageable for thematic analysis by manual coding. A search for the time frame from January 1 to December 31, 2022, yielded a total of 89 news articles: 40 that contained the combination of "Central Asia" and "expert," and 49 that combined "Middle Asia" with "expert." As the sample suggests, the two terms are used equally on the pages of *Argumenty i fakty*.

### Foreign Policy Discourse: Central Asian States and Societies in Central Asia

In the literature on Russia's foreign policy, Central Asian states (with the exception of Turkmenistan) are described as Russia's closest partners in the international arena, alongside Belarus and Armenia. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of all the Russia-led multilateral organizations: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Tajikistan is a member of the CSTO and hosts a Russian military base. For its part, Uzbekistan, while a member neither of the EAEU nor of the CSTO, has increased its collaboration with Russia significantly since President Mirziyoev's accession to power in 2016. While none of the Central Asian states have openly endorsed Russia's war in Ukraine, nor have they explicitly criticized it (Dadabaev & Sonoda 2022).

On the pages of *Argumenty i fakty*, the general tone of the interviewed experts' rhetoric on Central Asian governments is overwhelmingly positive. This is especially true in the case of Kazakhstan: president Qasym-Jomart Toqayev receives lofty praise from political commentators. Perhaps more importantly, Central Asian states are narrated as sovereign countries with their own agency and interests that might contradict those of Russia. For example, Fyodor Lukyanov, Director for Research at the well-known Valdai International Discussion Club, argues that "it is not necessary to demand of these countries [of Central Asia] that they, solely because we are allies, recognize the actions that Russia is carrying out for its own reasons" (November 21, 2022). This positive tone toward Central Asian governments is likely explainable by the official Kremlin rhetoric, which portrays the region's governments as Russia's partners rather than proxies of the West.

However, the foreign policy discourse on Central Asia also includes some elements that reflect a more imperialist view, namely that Russia is entitled to have the region as its exclusive sphere of influence, as well as that Central Asia is a zone of geopolitical contestation with the West (Omeličeva 2018). On the pages of *AiF*, Central Asia is systematically portrayed as a region that is vulnerable to exogenous threats. However, in contrast to earlier representations of this threat, which allegedly emanated from the South and the East in the form of Islamic extremism and terrorism (Omeličeva 2018), the main source of the threat in 2022 is supposedly the West, which is presumably pressuring Central Asian states to abandon their partnership with Russia (i.e., the only correct foreign policy course—Kassymbekova and Marat 2023). For instance, Sergei Karnaukhov, a pro-Kremlin TV host referred to as a "political analyst," claims that the West's goal is to turn Kazakhstan into "the new Syria" (April 23, 2022), while Sergei Stankevich, a prominent Kremlin propagandist quoted as a "political scientist," argues that "global powers" are trying to "plunge the region into chaos" (July 21, 2022).

However, the experts' statements evince neither panic nor alarmism, but rather faith in the countries' expected loyalty to Russia. Sergei Afontsev, Deputy Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow, argues:

We see unprecedented pressure from the United States and the European Union on our regional partners—the countries of Central and Southeast Asia, India, and China [...] In these conditions, from my point of view, the most important values for us are trust and solidarity, understanding the challenges facing each other, and solidarity in their solution. We believe in the solidarity of Kazakhstan [with Russia]. (October 19, 2022)

*AiF* reporting suggests that Central Asian governments face also endogenous threats, reportedly related to nationalism, radicalism, and "cultural degradation." Sometimes these endogenous threats mix with the exogenous threat from the West. For example, Alexei Borodavkin, the Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan, laments the fragility of Russian and Kazakhstani youth, who are "coming under the influence of false values, confrontational provocations and brainwashing by those who wish us ill" (October 19, 2022). According to him, young people could potentially "take the path of undermining state foundations and friendly relations between our countries" (Ibid.). The statement reflects a moral panic over young people's "wrong" political choices that has a long history in Russia.

Another theme that emerges from *AiF*'s portrayal of Central Asia in the foreign policy discourse is the threat of radicalism, at times in conjunction with nationalism. Andrei Kazantsev, Leading Researcher at the Institute for International Studies at Moscow's prestigious MGIMO University, interprets Kazakhstan's January protests as a struggle between Kazakhstan's middle class and an "aggressive declaration" of "extremist marginalization" (June 7, 2022), echoing the Soviet discourse on the struggle between "modern" and "backward" forces in Central Asia. However, there is a consensus that the Central Asian regimes are—at least for the time being—able to keep "radical ethnic nationalism" (Stankevich, July 21, 2022) at bay.

### Domestic Policy Discourse: Central Asian Societies in Russia

In contrast to the articles that employ the term "Central Asia," the texts that use "Middle Asia" do not cover events taking place in the region's states, but rather developments in Russia featuring Central Asians. As a result, the main topic of these pieces is Russian domestic policy, particularly issues related to immigration.

Works on Russian immigration policy highlight that due to the shrinking and aging population, the Russian economy is dependent on cheap migrant labor. At the same time, however, xenophobia and racism are not only widespread in society, but also institutionally rooted, and the public demand for restrictive immigration policies remains high. As a result, Russia's migration policy has produced a large number of undocumented migrants, particularly from Central Asian states (Schenck 2018, Urinboyev & Eraliev 2022). According to one scholarly estimate, the total number of migrants in Russia is six to seven million, with the majority coming from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 2019, there were thought to be over two million Uzbeks, one million Tajiks, and about 700,000 Kyrgyz nationals in Russia (Eraliev & Urinboyev 2022, 258).

*AiF*'s portrayal of Central Asia in what I call the domestic policy discourse reflects the tension between Russia's need for cheap migrant labor and the anti-migrant sentiments prevalent in society. However, likely as a result of the newspaper's commercial business model, the discourse is tilted toward the preferences of the readership. As a result, *AiF*'s reporting does note the positive contribution that Central Asian labor migrants make to the Russian economy (and, to an extent, Russian foreign policy), but it argues that the costs of this immigration outweigh its benefits. For example, one of the "experts" quoted, Alexei Zakharov, General Director of the SuperJob service, contends that while "it is, of course, important for us [Russia] to maintain good relations with the former Soviet republics and the use of migrants is one of the most effective ways [to do so]," the Kremlin's current migration policy "does more harm than good" (18 May 2022).

The calculus reflects racist assumptions that are widespread in Russian society, as the comparison to immigrants from Russia's Slavic neighbors in the west highlights. For example, Vladimir Kireev, Head of the analytical department of Aleksandr Dugin's International Eurasian Movement, cited as a "political scientist," insists that "any immigration from post-Soviet countries, with the exceptions of Ukraine and Belarus, negatively affects the foundations of [the Russian] society as it lowers the cultural level" (January 26, 2022). His explanation for the difference links to the discourse on the endogenous threats Central Asian states face: "Migrants are not villains at all, but the quality of education in their countries is falling, and religious radicalization is growing" (Ibid.)

Such xenophobic rhetoric is also employed by Vladislav Sakharchuk, cited as a "political scientist," who happens to work as a newspaper editor and local MP in the Kaluga region. According to him, encouraging immigration from Eastern Ukraine was simply cost-effective, as the integration of these individuals was a lot easier than "improving the lives of labor migrants" from Central Asian countries, who were "neither religiously nor culturally close to the local inhabitants" (March 11, 2022). These findings echo those of Kuznetsova and Round (2018), who argue that Central Asians in Russia face political and everyday xenophobia and racism that are the product of deeply rooted imperial views in Russia's domestic politics.

## Conclusions

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has generated new interest in Moscow's views of its neighbors, especially in the geographic area it considers its rightful sphere of influence: the countries of the former Soviet Union (apart from the Baltic States). Given that the discursive

challenging of Ukraine's sovereignty, both in nationalist circles and by President Putin himself (2021), preceded the effort to undermine it on the battlefield in a full-scale war, both experts and average citizens have become more sensitive to the word choices Russian policymakers and average citizens alike make when talking about the region. In addition, the Russian language has become one of the construction sites of the increasingly accepted decolonization movement within East European, Eurasian, Russian, and Slavic studies. Deconstructing patterns of (geographic) knowledge produced in Russian is a part of this undertaking, and the debate regarding the Russian-language discourse on Central Asia is not taking place in a vacuum. Instead, it is a part of a broader trend in which both governments and citizens of states neighboring Russia seek to push for their right to determine how their countries are called in Russian. However, the process is facing resistance from the government of the Russian Federation, which continues to refer to Belarus (Ru. *Belarus*) as *Belorussia* and Kyrgyzstan (Ru. *Kyrgyzstan*) as *Kirgizia*.

This article has argued that the Russian expert statements on Central Asia quoted in the popular low-brow weekly newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* demonstrate the existence of two separate discourses on the region. The article highlights the gap between the foreign policy discourse and the domestic policy one. The former mostly concerns Central Asian *states*, while the latter concerns Central Asians living and working in Russia. The article suggests that while the first discourse does have some imperialist underpinnings—namely the claim that the region's countries can only choose to ally with Russia—the second discourse portrays Central Asia in a xenophobic and racist manner, as an inherently problematic imagined geographical space. Whereas the foreign policy discourse refers to Central Asia using the term "Central" Asia, the domestic discourse employs "Middle" Asia. While a discussion of the cited experts' credibility lies beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that some of those commenting on Central Asia in the foreign policy discourse are actually based in the region, which might contribute to this discourse being more nuanced and more attuned to local agency.

The second argument put forward in this article is that Russian-speakers sensitive to the current decolonizing movement, whether they are aware of it or not, feel uneasy with the term "Middle Asia," just as they probably would with the preposition "in *the Ukraine*" (Ru. *na*, rather than *v, Ukraine*). While some have argued that "Middle Asia" is nothing but an outdated term rooted in the Russian imperial and Soviet era (Rusakova 2021), others have pointed out that the term is Russocentric, implying Russia's political control over the region (Gorshenina 2019, Akanaeva 2023). When he argues

that Russia's path in the 1990s was not toward "Europe" but "Middle Asia," Navalny is rhetorically tapping into the negative connotations that Russian-speakers attach to Central Asia, as demonstrated by the article's brief overview of the domestic policy discourse. While that

is regrettable (even if possibly unintended), the outcry that his word choice has triggered demonstrates that the ongoing decolonization movement is starting to bear some fruit.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. *Kristiina Silvan* is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Russia, EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Eurasia research program at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Her current research focuses on Russian–Central Asian relations and authoritarian politics in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de](mailto:laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: [www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html](http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html)