"Living in limbo": Digital narratives of migrants fleeing Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine
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Abstract
Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine more than one million Russian citizens have left Russia. This Russian migration is a political protest against Vladimir Putin’s regime — people are leaving due to their opposition to the war, persecution by authorities, and fear of mobilization — and are writing about this migration online. Despite fulfilling the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention or the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951) conditions, these Russian migrants have not yet received international recognition, and most live in total uncertainty in poor countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia with temporary visas and no possibility of entering Europe. This paper has two purposes. The first is to describe this group of migrants that challenges the definition of who is a refugee, in the context of this specific military conflict. The second purpose is to examine digital narratives published by these Russian migrants, characterized by a sense of living in uncertainty.

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Introduction
Global migration is one of the most significant phenomena of contemporary society. Climate crisis, poverty, the pursuit of better opportunities and living standards, violence, wars, and ethnic conflicts are some of the main reasons why large numbers of people move and migrate to other countries. Many of the global migrants are refugees or asylum seekers (Castles, et al., 2014) who are required, according to the UN Refugee Convention, to present a well-founded fear that they will be persecuted for one of five reasons: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Conflicts and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Africa have created millions of refugees dispersed around the world. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 produced the largest and fastest refugee exodus in Europe since the end of WWII, with over eight million Ukrainians fleeing to different European countries. The EU has recognized Ukrainians as refugees, providing temporary protection and residence, education, and work rights, and simplified border control and entry conditions. Despite the widespread use of the term ‘refugees’ in the media to describe Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, the majority do not fit into the
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This article has two purposes. The first is to describe and examine another group of refugees created as a result of the war in Ukraine that challenges the definition of who is a refugee in the context of this military conflict. More than one million Russian citizens have fled Russia since the beginning of the war and scattered around the neighboring ex-Soviet countries that allow entry without visas (e.g., Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan) or with tourist visas, like Turkey (Tofanuk and Sapronova, 2022). Most of these Russian migrants are living under temporary status and an unclear future in poorer countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, unable to enter more prosperous Western Europe. This paper’s main argument is that this current wave of Russian migrants is expressing political protest against Vladimir Putin’s regime. Their primary reasons for fleeing Russia include opposition to the war in Ukraine, persecution by the authorities, and evading mobilization. The Russian migrants are, therefore, refugees according to the official definition of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention or the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951), despite not yet receiving international recognition, temporary protection similar to the Ukrainian refugees, or permission to enter Europe.

The second purpose of this paper is to examine the digital narratives published by these Russian migrants, characterized by a sense of living in uncertainty. Three kinds of uncertainty were found: regarding their official status, their personal lives, and their future place of residence and time of returning home. Before examining these uncertainties, I first describe the history of migration from Russia/USSR over the last 100 years, which is important for understanding the meaning of the current Russian exodus.

**Historical background of Russian migration**

Over the last hundred years of Russia’s tragic and bloody history, there have been six large waves of emigration from Russia and USSR/FSU comprising tens of millions of people who left the country permanently. The current wave of Russian migration due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine can be seen as the seventh wave.

The first wave was mostly a Jewish migration that took place between 1881 and 1914 and included over two million people who left because of anti-Semitism and pogroms. The second wave of the so-called White emigration took place between 1918 and 1922; it included 1.5–3 million people of Russian nobility and the educated upper and middle class, most of whom opposed the Bolshevik Revolution and fled its terror and the ensuing Civil War. The White Army officers and the intellectuals expelled on the so-called ‘philosophers’ ship’ were also part of this wave (Gan, 2019). Most of these migrants arrived first in Istanbul, from which they continued to the major European cities such as Prague, Paris, London, and Berlin. The White emigration became kind of a founding myth, comprising migrants who hoped to return to their homeland after the impending fall of Communism (Raeff, 1990). For this reason, as discussed later, present-day Russian migrants frequently compare themselves to these migrants. The third wave of migration took place during and after the Second World War, when forced labor workers remained outside the borders of the Soviet Union (Polyan, 2016). The fourth wave was the Soviet Jewish emigration which took place between 1968 and 1980 and consisted mainly of activists who fought for their right to leave the Soviet Union for Israel, U.S., and other Western countries (Morozova, 2011). The fifth wave occurred following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union; it also included a significant number of Jews who left for Israel, America, Germany, and other countries (Remennick, 2007). The sixth wave, known as the Putin Exodus, started during Putin’s third term as president in 2012 and accelerated after the Crimea accession in 2014. Among those leaving were educated people, entrepreneurs, businessmen, hi-tech workers, and social activists from the upper middle class, most of whom maintained close ties with Russia. Their motivation for leaving was a combination of political and economic reasons. This wave comprised an estimated 1.6–2 million people who left for the U.S., Canada, Germany, Israel, and other democratic countries (Herbst and Erofeev, 2019). This paper asserts that the current wave of emigrants leaving Russia in the wake of the war in Ukraine is an extension of the Putin Exodus. Due to the large numbers leaving in a relatively short time, it constitutes a seventh wave of migration known in
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**Russian as the Great Exodus.**

**The current wave of migration**

Why are current migrants leaving Russia? The main reasons are political: the migrants oppose the war in Ukraine, Putin’s regime, and persecution of government opponents; they fear beatings at demonstrations, imprisonment, intimidation, and border closures; and young men among them are fleeing military mobilization (Izyumskaya, 2023). Economic reasons are also at stake, with the Russian economy damaged by international sanctions. Many others have left for professional reasons, such as employees of high-tech companies who were relocated to other countries. Some people described fleeing the country from shock during the early days of the war; many left out of panic, reporting that they could not breathe, eat, or sleep; many left with one suitcase in hand for the first country they could reach by car or plane (Najibullah, 2022; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022a). The reasons pushing them to leave had far more weight than the reasons attracting them to specific destination countries, a situation which makes them forced migrants (Castles, et al., 2014).

Putin’s regime has made it clear that it prefers its opponents to leave the country and even encourages their migration. Migration has become a common practice among opponents of the government, who are described as traitors of the motherland. The Russian parliament discussed the legal possibility of increasing taxes on migrants and expropriating and nationalizing their property (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023a). There is no way to establish the exact numbers of people leaving Russia. According to various estimates, around one million people have fled Russia after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. However, Russia does not publish official statistics and hides information regarding the current wave of departures, as well as birth and mortality rates and the number of victims in the war.

Who are the people leaving Russia because of the war in Ukraine and where are they moving? According to the results of surveys analyzing the characteristics of Russian migrants (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022b; Zavadskaya, 2022), most are young (between mid–20s and early 40s), educated, work in high tech, media, marketing, art, or culture or are scientists and educators. Most are from Moscow and Saint Petersburg and belong to the middle classes, an active and mobile sector of the Russian society. They typically have personal resources for migration: money, an apartment for rent or sale, knowledge of foreign languages, connections, and good health (Izyumskaya, 2023). Many have participated in demonstrations against the war at home and now take part in the ongoing protests and political activity in the new destination countries. Countries with the largest number of Russian migrants are Georgia and Armenia, both post-Soviet states, followed by Turkey. Russian citizens do not need visas for these countries and life there is relatively cheap. Other receiving countries included post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and other countries in Eastern and Western Europe, Spain, Argentina, Dubai, U.S., and Israel.

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**Theoretical background**

By combining the sociology of migration with media and communication technologies, this article aims to investigate the narratives of uncertainty published by Russian migrants in digital space. Below I discuss the main characteristics of refugees in a global context and, then, their use of social media.

**Who is a refugee? Refugees in the global era**

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as persons in need of protection for fear of persecution on the grounds of race, nationality, religion, membership of a particular group, or political opinion. Later definitions added to this list include external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, massive violations of human rights, and violence or events disturbing public order (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 1969; Organizations of American States, 1985).
The definition of refugees has long been a topic of interest and debate in the social study of migration. In recent decades, reasons for their migration have been key for creating a typology of refugees. One view posits that refugee movements are caused by political rather than economic factors, while another rejects the distinction between political and economic determinants and includes a wider range of phenomena, such as famine and ecological disasters which produce climate refugees (Hiraide, 2023). According to Hamlin (2021), there is a split in scholarly research, popular media discourse, and the legal field between voluntary, economically motivated, and undeserving migrants and forced, politically motivated, and deserving refugees. This binary categorization is, however, social and legal fiction, as global migrations and the lived experiences of border crossers present a far more complex pattern. People migrate for a wide variety of reasons ranging from the completely voluntary to the absolutely forced because of a combination of factors, some of which approximate the definition of refugees and others which do not. Moreover, recognizing some migrants, and not others, as refugees expresses geopolitical situations, political interests, and power relations between states. In the violent context of the war in Ukraine, the involuntary and political nature of the current wave of Russian migration characterizes it as forced. The Russian migrants can be seen as refugees due to their opposition to the war and rejection of taking up arms, hence escape from mobilization.

Mesić (1995) created a typology of refugees in the Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian context according to sociological elements of pre-refugee experiences and post-refugee perspectives. Of his six categories, “impelled refugees/displacees” are the most relevant for the current case and, in fact, the most typical category of political refugee population. As people who are forced to flee as a result of various types of pressure, threats, and intimidation [1], this category befits the present-day political refugees from Russia, some of whom left Russia due to threats from the authorities after publishing messages against the war on social media or participating in street protests.

Joly (2002) proposed a distinction between “Odyssean” and “Rubicon” refugees according to the reference to their homeland. Odyssean refugees are:

Actors who were not just victims of the structure of conflict in their country of origin but were positively committed to the political struggle and to the project of society in their homeland; they also brought this project with them into exile so that they are committed to a collective project in the homeland despite the defeat they have suffered; in some circumstances they may have adhered to such a project in exile. [2]

Odyssean refugees perceive themselves as temporary in their host society, and the collective actions they organize reflect the structure of conflict in their native country. Rubicon refugees, on the other hand, have a completely different relationship to their homeland. They lived as a minority group in their country of origin and cannot — and do not intend to — go back. They crossed the Rubicon — the borders of their country — and passed a point of no return because of the persecutions and threats to their lives in their country of origin.

The Russian exiles analyzed in this article represent the Odyssean refugees due to their resistance to Putin’s regime, the political stance against the war in Ukraine, and opposition to the war which they bring with them into exile. They hope to come back after the war in order to build the beautiful Russia of the future (a figure of speech expressing their hope for Russian democracy [3]).

**Uncertainty in the context of migration**

Migration journeys usually entail various risks and uncertainty, and also generate them. The meaning of risk is connected “to known probabilities of outcomes” [4], contrary to uncertainty which is “precarious or unpredictable life conditions” [5]. Economic research typically paid more attention to risks in migration, while sociology and anthropology hinged on the concept of uncertainty. This paper is dealing with the experiences of uncertainty among Russian migrants from a social-anthropological point of view.
Most migrants experience a high level of uncertainty, leaving a familiar place, generating economic, social, linguistic and sometimes physical uncertainty (Maas, et al., 2022). This is especially relevant for refugees who have to leave their homeland in an unplanned and sudden way. There are two types of uncertainty: imperfect knowledge about their new environment and the unpredictability of their future (Williams and Baláž, 2012). Additionally, in the legal field, the definition of who is a refugee suffers from radical uncertainty (Liodden, 2020). Researchers have argued that refugees’ uncertainty can be associated with the Turner’s famous liminality (Schiltz, et al., 2019); refugees are “in a state of being in between, both in a temporal and spatial sense” [6], “no longer classified and not yet classified” [7].

Horst and Grabska (2015) argued that many refugees remain in refugee-like situations, without access to the privileges granted under international refugee law. This is the situation for the Russian migrants who are presently living in various countries in the temporal status of tourists, which can be seen as a refugee-like situation or situation of potential refugees, without applying for asylum, international recognition, protection, special visas, or aid programs, and with an uncertain future.

In this paper I use the term migrants to refer to the Russians who left the country after the outbreak of the war. I argue that they are refugees even though they have not thus far been granted refugee status. Their experience in exile can be characterized as living in uncertainty.

Migration and digital space

There is a growing body of work on migrant experiences of uncertainty in relation to the use of digital media across different countries. Migrants have been found to use digital means to navigate and negotiate uncertainties arising from leaving their homes, the housing allocations and bureaucratic procedures in their receiving countries (Bolhuis and van Wijk, 2020; Miellet, 2021).

Russian social networks such as VK, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram provide sources of information that the regime cannot easily control about emigration, appropriate countries for people who cannot live in Russia anymore, and possible ways of leaving. Although some of the global online platforms and independent media have been blocked or closed in Russia, there are many Internet groups dedicated to emigration, the most famous being a Facebook group called It’s time to split — All about migration with 255,000 members. Additionally, Russians who have left the country have established many grassroots associations for migrants abroad; the most famous is called Kovcheg (The Ark). It defines its mission thus:

Since the beginning of the war, hundreds of thousands of Russians have left the country. Many of them went into the unknown, having neither work nor savings. We support Russian emigrants who denounce the military aggression against Ukraine and do not see opportunities for themselves to live in Putin’s Russia (Kovcheg, n.d.).

The organization’s official purpose is to provide housing for first few weeks, legal advice on migration-related issues, psychological assistance, and introduction to other Russian migrants. In other words, they aim to help with the problems of temporal and spatial uncertainty experienced by this group of migrants.

Below I examine the personal narratives of Russian migrants published in the digital space describing their coping with three types of uncertainties in different receiving countries.

Methodology
The Russian-language Internet today is full of personal stories, videos, blogs, interviews, and newspaper articles dedicated to the issue of Russian citizens fleeing Russia. This article follows the methodology of digital migration studies (Alencar, 2020; Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018), namely, the qualitative study of migration on, through, and by means of the Internet that seeks to understand the relationships between migration and digital connectivity. It is bricolage research, combining different types of sources and fragments in digital space connected to the contemporary Russian migration.

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of 62 primary and secondary sources of various types, which were collected during the first year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The 32 primary sources are the stories of the Russian immigrants themselves that have been published in the Russian digital space since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. They described their thoughts, feelings, and hopes on VK, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and on Internet blogs. Comprising 20 men and 12 women, most from Moscow and St. Petersburg, this is not a representative sample, but I believe it captures the perceptions and thoughts of many migrants. Their stories make it possible to observe in an unmediated and in-depth way the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of Russian citizens who decided to leave the country.

The 30 secondary sources are the interviews with migrants, commentaries, and interpretations by journalists and researchers of the Russian migration that appeared on various Russian-language independent media Web sites (Some secondary sources in English and Hebrew were also analyzed). These materials were published on news Web sites, such as Meduza, Holod, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. These news sites are the most famous, Russian-language, independent alternatives to the state-controlled media. The Russian government designated them “foreign agents,” namely, undesirable organizations, and blocked them. Their journalists therefore fled Russia and have relaunched outside the country (Tolstoy, 2023). The sites are accessible to Russia citizens living in Russia through the use of VPNs. I collected all the articles published on these Web sites during the first year of the war dealing with the topic of Russian migration: the reasons for migration, the numbers, destination countries, and difficulties, problems, and challenges facing the migrants (according to a search in Russian of keywords such as “evacuation,” “relocation,” “Russian migration,” “Russian exodus,” and “Russians escape mobilization”). I also used reports about the lives of Russian migrants from the online blog of Russian-Israeli author Linor Goralik, who visited Turkey, Armenia, and Georgia during the first months of the war.

This research used grounded theory as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This is appropriate for cases when there is only a general and open research question, with no hypotheses to prove or disprove. The question was: “What are the interpretations and perceptions of Russian migrants regarding their migration experiences?” The analysis proceeded on three levels. The first level included bringing all types of digital materials into text form. Materials came from different sources — like personal stories on Facebook; videos from YouTube that needed to be transcribed before the analysis. The second level is a thematic analysis looking for major themes and patterns in the personal stories of Russian migrants. The third level consists of finding theoretical meaning of the second-level categories. Since the topic of uncertainty was dominant in their stories, as well in the online media, I read theoretical materials about uncertainty experienced by different migrants and refugees across the world. This was a circular and recurring process including data collection and its theoretical analysis, according to the principles of grounded theory.

The majority of the sources were published in Russian and translated by me into English.

Selected findings

From my analysis of the primary and secondary sources I found three types of uncertainty among Russian migrants: about their official status, the context of their personal lives, and their place of residence and possible time of return.
"Who are we?": Uncertainty in the official status

Refugees are people who are in between in terms of both their legal status and what they denote as a category. The experience of exile is often characterized by limbo: people are caught between places hoping for return, and between categories, seeking refugee status or legal residence in the host country (El-Shaarawi, 2015). A central expression of the uncertainty and ambivalence among Russian migrants relates to their formal label: what are they called and how are they classified? There is a fierce discussion on social networks among both the migrants themselves and journalists/observers about this label in the Russian language: is it leaving — “отъезд,” escaping — “беженство,” relocating — “релокация,” evacuating — “эвакуация,” or migrating — “иммиграция”? In the first months of the war, only the Russian terms for relocation and evacuation were used. These concepts were particularly common among high-tech workers, when entire international companies relocated all their employees to nearby countries beyond Russia’s borders. But even professionals who left Russia due to their opposition to the war found it difficult to refer to themselves as migrants. As explained by Russian intellectual Irina Prokhorova in an interview given to the Israeli newspaper *Calcalist*:

> People use the word “relocation” rather than the Russian word “migration” because they find it difficult to admit that they are leaving forever. This uncertainty creates tension because a person who decides to emigrate tries to assimilate in the new place, but the people who are leaving Russia now think that this is a temporary situation and that with the end of the war they will return. (Shulman, 2022)

Likewise, Russian political scientist Professor Andrei Zubov, who left for the Czech Republic after being expelled from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, explained in an interview the difference between today’s wave of Russian migration and previous waves:

> Did you emigrate or only leave?

> Migration is moving to another country with the aim of living there until the end, giving your children the opportunity to live there and finding a new homeland. My family is in a completely different situation. You can call it a work trip because my son and I could no longer work in our profession in Russia due to the persecution of the authorities ... . Our departure was also reflected immediate danger for me — arrest, trial and prison — because I say things that do not coincide with the point of view of the current government in Russia. We decided to leave to avoid these dangers. But we will be back as soon as this regime falls ... . In the late 1980s, after the beginning of perestroika, people who were looking for a better life left the Soviet Union. It was exactly migration ... . Contrary to them, we want to return to Russia like the White emigrés who left a century ago. (Tolstoy, 2023)

In the sources analyzed in this article, the use of the Russian word for refugees was found to be used more in the context of those fleeing Ukraine. According to the migrants from Russia, the refugees from Ukraine are the real victims, forced to leave their homes because of the horrors of the war. Indeed, many of the Russian migrants writing online spoke out against the war and called for money, equipment, and volunteers to help the Ukrainian refugees. But some of them expressed the desire for Russian migrants to also be recognized as refugees. Indeed, after the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia and the subsequent fleeing of thousands of young men, the use of the term *refugees* seems, in my opinion, more appropriate
due to the political reason for their escape.

Expression of the migrants’ ambivalence over their own status was evident in the videos of Dima, a Russian young man who, fearing mobilization, escaped to Kazakhstan and then Georgia. He is a 25-year-old blogger who uploads short videos about his life after escaping from Russia in English and asks viewers to buy him coffee and donate money. On 28 October 2022 he released a video called Mobilization Refugee, which, like his other videos, it received thousands of views (17,000) and hundreds of supportive comments (250). In a video uploaded to YouTube on 15 November 2022 he referred explicitly to the uncertainty of his official status:

Do I miss Russia? Maybe I want to come back to Russia? Don’t think I am stupid. No way. I don’t want to come back to Russia. Some people would call me a deserter, others a refugee. They can also call me a migrant. To be honest, I don’t know what is my status. I still haven’t applied for asylum in any country in the world like Germany. Germany offers asylum to those who tried to avoid a mobilization. But I didn’t receive this call from the Russian military office to prove that I could be recruited. But even if you didn’t get it now it doesn’t mean you can’t be taken by force to the war in the future. I don’t know what’s in Putin’s mind. What will be his next step? According to Putin’s law everyone can be recruited. I am a reservist. (Dear, 2022)

The main difficulties for Russian migrants today stem from the sanctions that many Western countries have applied against Russia, cancellations of flights, closing of borders, the negative image of all Russians as representatives of an occupying power, and xenophobic sentiments against Russians. As the 47-year-old writer Linor Goralik described in her blog about Russian migrants in Tbilisi:

In the inverted world, the people who managed to escape from the regime in Iran and North Korea are called refugees and are rescued. In contrast, the people who managed to escape from the regime in Russia are called occupiers and are welcomed with a spit on the back and a rental price of $600 for a single room without heating. (Goralik, 2022a)

It is not clear how to label people who migrate these days. Everyone is looking for a word and not finding it. (Goralik, 2022a)

As a result of this complex situation, Boris Grozovski, a 52-year-old Russian oppositional journalist forced to flee Russia, wrote a Facebook post in which he explained the obstacles facing Russians who decided to leave the country and their status as political refugees:

Those who fled Russia and Belarus are also refugees. We ran away from the war and from a violent dictatorial regime. We are held responsible for the atrocities that are happening in Ukraine because of our citizenship. In order not only to escape but also to join the people of good will, refugees from Russia and Belarus have to help Ukrainians now ... . We are not tourists but refugees. In Russia, the police were looking for me for distributing petitions against the war. Many people ... are fleeing to Georgia and other countries from Russia ... they are not tourists but refugees like the Ukrainian refugees in Europe.
The only difference is that Russians escaped not from the bullets, bombs, and rockets but from imprisonment. If I wrote these things in Russia, I would be sent to prison for 15–20 years ... . Many Russians escaped because in Russia today it is forbidden to speak, think, or write the truth or to speak out against Putin and against the war. We didn’t want to leave; we had to run away. We experience pain, shame, rejection, and anger, and a lack of answers. (Grozovski, 2022)

Opinions among the Russian migrants are divided. Some use more neutral words like relocation, which refers to the temporary nature of their move and their professional field (Meduza, 2023a). Some find it difficult to even call themselves migrants because of their hope of returning to Russia as soon as possible, while others demand recognition as refugees and explain the persecutions and dangers from which they fled (Medvedev, 2022). This ambivalence about their categorization is a central feature of the uncertainty; Russian exiles face a double jeopardy of their image as traitors in Russia, to be denounced and deprived of their rights (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023b) and hostile attitudes toward them outside Russia’s borders “as citizens of an occupying country” (Goralik, 2022a).

Thus, categorial uncertainty can be characterized as uncertainty according to the official status of migrants in a host society, their recognition and categorization as refugees, or the rejection of this status.

Depression, grief, and anxiety: Uncertainty in the context of personal lives

People who are in between statuses, unclassified, or unlikely to be granted refugee status live in a world of liminal legality, which can be a source of enormous anxiety with psychological and material consequences (Hamlin, 2021). Indeed, an article called “Depression, sadness and fear” was published on 2 January 2023 in a free news portal in the Russian language reporting on the psychological condition of Russian migrants (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023b). Many of the migrants interviewed for the article described the interruption to their personal lives as a result of their sudden migration: for example, young people leaving their university studies, working adults abandoning their jobs, and parents taking their children out of kindergartens and schools into the unknown future.

In another example of the migrant experience, Viktor, a 28-year-old stand-up artist, described his experience thus:

I just want to talk. Today I’m celebrating an anniversary: I’ve been out of Russia for half a year. For half a year, my life has stopped and stood still — I’m on a timeout. Sometimes I wake up in the morning, write a post against the war in Ukraine, and return to my mad and hopeless state We decided to leave Russia half a year ago, and we are in Kazakhstan. I know that all my complaints and cries seem insignificant in comparison to the suffering of the Ukrainian people. I understand that I have small problems compared to the people who fled the war and bombs ... I want to end the timeout and continue with my life. (Kopanitsa, 2022)

Psychological discourse and descriptions of anxiety and depression are common among the refugees. Sanya, a 23-year-old blogger now living in Turkey, referred to his difficult mental state:

My name is Sanya. I have been living in Turkey for more than six months. I lived for two months in Istanbul and the rest of the time in Marmaris. I want to talk about the psychological aspect of migration. Until February 24, I lived in Russia like
everyone else. I studied at the Higher Film School in Moscow. During March I was very scared. I was against the war with Ukraine. In March I left for Istanbul. My credit cards stopped working. I have no permanent place of residence. Prices for renting apartments increased. I am tired of moving between different hotels. We could not get a visa to Germany. We were refused. While waiting for a visa we moved to Marmaris and found an apartment here. A quiet period without work started. I went into complete apathy and experienced pre-depression. It’s better to leave for some reason than to run away from trouble. I lost myself in Turkey. I have no answer to the question of what awaits me in the future. (Kojimachenko, 2022)

The difficult state of mind, anxiety, and depression among these migrants reflect their sudden departure from Russia but also the collective guilt and shame they feel for the Russian occupation and the war crimes committed by Russian soldiers against Ukrainian civilians. The unique context of migrants from Russia following the war in Ukraine increases uncertainty. As Linor Goralik (2022b) wrote in her blog about Russians in Yerevan: “It is difficult to read about problems of migrants in the context of the war in Ukraine. Do my little problems and big thoughts matter today? I have nothing to talk about while all this horror is happening.”

Biographical uncertainty is connected to the personal biographies of migrants and refugees; the normal flow of life came to end, and all the regular stages of their life have been postponed due to a sudden and unplanned migration. Biographical uncertainty is accompanied by host of inherent psychological problems.

“Where will I be tomorrow and when will I be able to come back?” Uncertainty in the context of place and time

Dimensions of time and space are the central components of human life. They are completely undermined in circumstances of forced migration when people do not know where they will live and what the future holds for them, and are even more unstable in the context of the war in Ukraine. Many Russian migrants left Russia suddenly without prior planning for the first country to which they managed to get a plane ticket and sometimes without a visa. They currently live temporarily as tourists in various countries in anticipation of the end of the war or a change of government in Russia. In some of the countries that received a large number of Russian immigrants, such as Turkey, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, an easy and relatively short procedure — for example, renting an apartment, buying property, or opening a business in the country — enabled migrants to obtain permanent residency status and even citizenship. However, as of January 2023, in some of these countries, for example, Kazakhstan, the Russian migrants began to receive more refusals to temporary or permanent status (Meduza, 2023b). As a result, many have been forced to leave and move, once again, to countries, such as Georgia, without such restrictions. According to materials analyzed in this research, many have reported having to move between three different countries within a few months. These transitions from country to country increase a sense of uncertainty and make it difficult for individuals to develop a normal routine. For example, Kusnezeva, a Russian pyschologist migrant current living in Georgia, explained the difficulties of Russian migrants:

This is a complicated situation because people have arrived in, for example, Georgia, and they don’t know how long they will stay here or go to Turkey, Europe, or somewhere else. This is an ongoing anxiety disorder. It is healthier when a person arrives somewhere and already knows that they have moved here for good. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023c)

Well-known Russian journalist Masha from the independent Russian television channel Dozhd, currently living in Latvia, described the ambivalence of the perception of a place of residence for her today:
When will I come back to Russia? I try not to think about it. I want to come back as soon as possible. I want to take the first flight home. I know it won’t happen. When people ask me where I live, I get a bit stuck. I don’t know what to answer. I don’t think I live here [in Latvia]. I definitely don’t live in Moscow. But I can’t say I live in Riga. I consider the possibility that I will never come back to Russia. This is one of the heaviest thoughts that I have. (vDud, 2022)

Linor Goralik wrote about the experiences of uncertainty and the hope of returning to Russia among Russian migrants in Tbilisi:

We are not migrants. We came here to preserve our mental health. We will go back, the only questions are when and how. We left our apartments and the things that nobody wants but that are precious to us: books, toys, old records. (Goralik, 2022a)

Similarly, in her film about the Russian migrants Anastasia Izyumskaya (2023) explained: “Nobody knows how much time the Russian migrants will spend away from their homeland.”

While the waiting and hope for eventual return give meaning to the difficulties of forced migration, they can also be destructive as they make people sit on their suitcases and prevent them from settling in a new country and investing in their future in a new place (Brun, 2015). Because of that, many Russian migrants talk about just living from one day to the next, solving practical issues, and organizing their lives in a new place.

Temporal and spatial uncertainty is thus expressed through the unpredictability of what will happen to the migrants and where they will find themselves in the short term — sometimes as short as next week or next month and preventing them from creating long-term plans.

Conclusions

According to various estimates, more than one million Russian citizens have left Russia since the start of the war in Ukraine. Most left unprepared and under great pressure, fearing border closure and possible mobilization, in a wave of migration known in Russian as the Great Exodus. It comprises several sub-waves, the largest being the first outflux taking place immediately after the start of the war or during the spring months, and then the second outflux, prompted by Putin’s September 2022 announcement of partial military mobilization. The migrants are portrayed in Russia as traitors, and several proposals have been made in the State Duma to increase their taxation and even nationalize their property (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023b). These migrants belong to the educated middle class, causing a brain drain from Russia, and most express a desire to return to Russia and to build new and liberal country after the end of the war. They can be seen as people who voted by their feet in favor of a Western democratic ideology.

This article argues that this wave of Russian migration challenges the accepted definition of who is a refugee in the context of the war in Ukraine. Central characteristics of this wave — the sudden, involuntary departure, the choice of the first country which could be reached without a visa, the political reasons for leaving including opposition to Putin’s rule and the war in Ukraine, the escape from mobilization, and fear of persecution due to political opinions and participation in anti-war demonstrations — define Russian migrants as refugees according to the official definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, the
migrants are attacked for being responsible for the war and feel the need to apologize for talking about their problems in exile, while Russia is waging the war in Ukraine, murdering innocent Ukrainian citizens, and forcing millions of Ukrainians to leave their homes. It is absolutely impossible to compare the experiences of Ukrainian and Russian refugees during the Ukrainian war, but still both of them are victims of this conflict (Sonin, 2023).

Over time, the Russian migrants may become illegal residents due to their inability to attain legal status in certain countries. In the past, there were greater possibilities for legalization in poorer countries, such as Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey, where most of the Russian refugees arrived, but, today, it is increasingly difficult to achieve legal status even there. The Baltic countries and Finland simply closed the borders to those fleeing mobilization in Russia. Migrants have to move time and again between host countries, but it is extremely difficult for most of them to enter Europe and receive refugee status. They can apply for refugee status in Western Europe on an individual basis. According to pundits and social activists located in Russia and in different European countries, since sanctions against Russia had started, it has become almost impossible to ask for refugee status, as most asylum requests have to be submitted on the territory of the destination country or near its border (Dulneva, 2022). Russian asylum seekers find it impossible to reach EU countries because flights between Russia and Europe have been cancelled after the start of the war and most foreign embassies in Russia were closed. Additionally, people have to prove that their life in Russia was in real danger. The evidence for the life threatening situation is hard to produce and prove; hence only a small minority of high-profile Russian dissidents, activists, and journalists succeeded in securing refugee status (Dulneva, 2022). For example, Russian migrants are unable to obtain entry visas into Germany from countries where they are currently living as tourists. A number of German politicians, such as Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, have spoken in favor of granting refugee status to Russian men who have fled mobilization (Karadag, 2022), but no decision has, thus far, been reached.

For now, most live in total uncertainty in poorer countries of Europe and Asia. The digital media examined in this article points at three types of uncertainty characterizing the exile experience of this group: the first concerns their official status; the second concerns their personal lives; and the third concerns issues of time and space, not knowing what the future holds for them and where they will live in the coming months and years. The radical uncertainty and the ambivalent status in their eyes and in the eyes of the host society, being in limbo and a liminal situation, characterizes their experience in exile. It is expressed in questions that many of the Russian migrants ask themselves again and again: how to label the phenomenon of Russians fleeing Russia and how to define themselves: are they refugees or is this relocation, evacuation, leaving, or migration? They are also unsure what will happen in the future in their personal lives and their places of residence. Their experience can be called living in uncertainty — an uncertainty which is exacerbated by collective guilt for war crimes committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine.

This article hopefully lays the ground for a theoretical understanding of the uncertainty of refugees. First, viewed comparatively, all the different groups of refugees around the world — be they internally displaced Georgians from Abkhazia (Brun, 2015), Iraqi refugees in Egypt (El-Shaarawi, 2015), refugees from the Middle East and Africa in Turkey and Europe (Braithwaite, et al., 2018), and Ukrainian refugees in Europe (Ramji-Nogales, 2022) — are fleeing violent conflicts and wars. In contrast, Russian migrants are fleeing Russia after the outbreak of the war for political reasons; they run not from bullets or bombs but from a political regime in their homeland. Second, the paper presents new and different analytical types of uncertainty: categorical, biographical, and temporal and spatial. Third, my analysis adds new insights to the uncertainty of refugees as social phenomenon which is constituted through certain conditions. In the geopolitical situation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the fact that Russians emigrants belong to the invading and oppressing side of the war leads them to express shame, which reinforces the uncertainty of their status and identity; refugees who belong to the heroic side of the war might feel more deserving of refugee status and recognition.

The war in Ukraine is being waged not only on the physical battlefield but also in the digital space. Some social networks and internet channels in Russia have been closed down (Facebook and Instagram) or are expected to close (YouTube), and all independent media have been forced to leave the country. Russian
citizens who speak out against the war have been declared *foreign agents*, arrested, and/or forced to leave the country. Nonetheless, many Russians continue to consume free Russian media created by exiled journalists and, thus, the central characteristic of this wave of the migration is its digital nature. There is much online information in Russian about migration, the reasons to migrate, the types of documents needed, where it is easier and cheaper to live, and how to find employment in different countries. The economic and financial issues, problematic for those leaving due to the Western sanctions against Russia, also receives a great deal of coverage on Russian social networks.

It can therefore be argued that a wave of Russian migrants fleeing because of the war in Ukraine has been maintained in digital space and is being expressed through it. Migrants have created a network of online forums where they try to deal with the uncertainty of their situation. This large online presence of recent migrants is unprecedented, allowing them to stay in touch with Russia, their relatives and friends. The sharing of their personal narratives and experiences of uncertainty in digital space allows them to self-reflect, receive support from other Russian migrants, and gain visibility, social recognition, and maybe future legitimization.

Only time will tell whether the migrants who have left Russia because of the war in Ukraine will return to their homeland or will remain forever scattered around the world, similar to their counterparts in the previous waves of migration from Russia and USSR/FSU.

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