ANALYSIS

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

RUSSIANS POST PORTAS

Mapping New Russian Diaspora in Serbia

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Following the Russian invasion on Ukraine in February 2022 and partial mobilisation in Russia in September 2022, a large number of Russian citizens came to Serbia, where at least 30,000 of them still reside. Reasons for choosing Serbia vary, but the major ones are relative ease of travel and stay, proximity to the EU and western nations and favourable social context. Over 200 Russian citizens participated in the anonymous survey and 16 were interviewed in person.

Russian immigrants to Serbia are typically more educated and somewhat younger compared to the Russian population. Two notable groups comprise: a) relatively young men, with higher education, full-time employment in the IT sector and thus with income untethered to his location, and who mostly rents a flat in Belgrade or Novi Sad, and b) families with small child or children, often buying a house, enrolling children in local schools and more interested in blending in the long run.

The Russian immigrants are overwhelmingly anti-establishment, emphasising Putin regime's chief responsibility for the war in Ukraine and describe it as an aggression. They vote against Putin, are active through donations and petitions online, and participate in protests and meetings regarding Russia in Serbia. Nonetheless, as the war drags on, they are increasingly disillusioned about the prospects for political change in Russia and also somewhat disappointed and critical of Zelenskyy, EU and NATO.

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Summary

The full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 and the following partial mobilization caused arguably the largest scale political immigration from Russia since the Russian revolution over a hundred years ago. While exact figures are unavailable, estimates vary from 650,000 to over 1 million Russians fleeing the country from 2022 onwards.

A significant number of them came to Serbia, where some 30,000 or more new Russian emigres still reside. Reasons for choosing Serbia vary, but the major ones are relative ease of travel and stay (travel routes and flights are open, there is no entry visa), proximity to the EU and western nations, as well as favourable social context, since Serbs are generally welcoming towards Russians. Over 200 Russian citizens participated in the anonymous survey and 16 were interviewed in person.

Challenges of immigration notwithstanding, new Russian immigrants express generally favourable views about their reception and status in Serbia. While some of them struggle, the majority can find work (especially in the IT sector), they can rent or buy properties, enrol their children to school, and learn some Serbian and/or use English.

In terms of their profile, Russian immigrants to Serbia are typically more educated and somewhat younger compared to the Russian population mean, with slightly more men than women arriving. Generalising slightly, the profile of the Russian immigrants could be illustrated with two typical figures: a relatively young man, with higher education, full-time employment in the IT sector and thus with income untethered to his location, and who mostly rents a flat in Belgrade or Novi Sad. He has no fixed long-term plans and is prone to moving to the EU or west if possible, uses English to communicate and his social interactions are mostly limited to other recent Russian immigrants of similar background. The second type would be a family with a small child or children, more inclined to buy than rent, often living in a house in Vojvodina, central or western Serbia, enrolling their children in local schools and more interested in learning some Serbian and interacting with Serbs, often through ties initiated by – and for – their children.

Arguably the most striking difference between the Russian immigrants and their compatriots in Russia are their political views and attitudes: they are overwhelmingly anti-establishment, emphasising Putin regime's chief responsibility for the war in Ukraine and describe it as an aggression. They vote against Putin in Russian presidential elections, are active through donations and petitions online, and a rather sizable portion participates in protests and meetings regarding Russia in Serbia. Nonetheless, as the war drags on, they have become increasingly disillusioned about the prospects for political change in Russia and also somewhat disappointed and critical of Zelenskyy, EU and NATO. Yet, while their interest in Russian politics is waning, at present many of them express their responsibility for the destiny of Russia and are willing to show considerable political awareness about the situation there.

They follow Serbian politics to some extent but show no particular interest in being politically active, nor even in broader social participation and assimilation in Serbian society at large. They face contingencies that make long-term planning difficult, meaning that their situation can be said to be precarious. Given the current fluctuating context of Russian exiles across Europe and Asia indicated by other studies as well,[1] it would be unwise to give predictions about the long-term plans of Russians in Serbia or offer estimates whether they will remain there and extent to which they will become a coherent or organized group in the country.

1 'Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine', 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine, p. 9./

1

INTRODUCTION

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a huge number of Russians migrated from Russia. While reliable, official data about the number of persons that left Russia are unavailable, the newest research[2] suggests a staggering number of at least 650,000 who left the country and are still abroad, with some media even putting that number at over 1 million.[3]

A large number of those Russians choose Serbia as their destination. However, this highly relevant social trend has been poorly researched so far, and thus we have no reliable information about the size of the recent Russian immigration to Serbia, their political status and views, plans and prospects. This study focuses on Russians who have come to Serbia in or after the spring of 2022. It aims to explore the specific reasons for their emigration, unravel their political views of the conflict as well as individuals and institutions representing this conflict, delve into their perspectives on political activism, and understand their future plans, including a potential return to Russia. Over 200 Russians have taken part in the survey of this study, with 16 of them interviewed in more detail.

Coming up with the number of Russian migrants in Serbia is not a simple affair. Serbian tabloids often made sensationalist claims about alleged hundreds of thousands of Russians in Serbia – usually to attract readership and make Serbia look appealing[4] – but these numbers are grossly exaggerated and completely unsubstantiated. Official statistics offers far more modest numbers of 30-40 thousand recent Russians immigrants to Serbia. For instance, the population census held in late 2022 recorded some 10,500 Russians in Serbia, which is three times more than in the previous, 2011 census. As a number of Russians were not registered by the census, other helpful information for estimating the Russian population in Serbia is that Serbia issued close to 20,000 work permits to Russian citizens in 2023, that around 30,000 Russians altogether were granted temporary residence permits, and 7,000 new companies were founded by Russian persons.[5] To be sure, even Russians without residence permits can reside in Serbia on the basis of a tourist visa that lasts up to 90 days. However, they are required to leave its territory before this deadline, at least for a day, after which they can return and stay another 90. While there are popular anecdotal stories about many Russians just driving across the bridge into Bosnia and back every 90 days, it is unlikely that in the long run many would use this procedure rather than acquiring a residence permit, which can be done online with relative ease. Despite the absence of exact and reliable figures, all this nevertheless suggests that the real figure of Russians arriving from early 2022 onwards and currently residing in Serbia is probably at least 30,000, and possibly a dozen or so thousand more.

The reasons Russian citizens choose Serbia are diverse and complex, and certainly not equally applicable across all individual cases. Still, this influx is surely facilitated by the long-standing Serbian-Russian free visa arrangement, allowing Russian to come to Serbia with relative ease. Other reasons include a generally positive perception of Russia and Russians among Serbs, religious and linguistical similarities, and lack of anti-Russian laws by the Serbian government, which is among the few in Europe that did not impose sanctions on Russia, nor limited travel and entry requirements for Russian citizens. Indeed, travel options and direct flights between Moscow and Belgrade remain operational. Last but not the least, Russians leaving their country have relatively limited prospects, especially if they wish to move westward, and some chose Serbia reluctantly, as a second choice or in the absence of better alternatives. To be sure, Russians in Serbia also face some challenges; while the majority emphasises psychological difficulties and the language barrier as the main ones, some also point to difficulties in finding accommodation, securing a job or regulating their legal status.

The relative ease of migrating to Serbia also comes with some peculiarities. The topic of Russian-Serbian political rela-

2 'Russia's 650,000 wartime emigres', 19 July 2024, The Bell. https://en.thebell.io/russias-650-000-wartime-emigres/.

3 'Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus', The Washington Post, 13 February 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/13/ russia-diaspora-war-ukraine/.

4 'Koliki je uticaj ruskih migranata na srpsku privredu?' [What's the effect of Russian migrants on Serbian economy], 18 May 2023, https://talas.rs/2023/05/18/koliki-je-uticaj-ruskih-migranata-na-srpsku-privredu/; 'U Srbiju je došlo njih 370.000: Ovi stranci su totalno promenili naše tržište' [370,000 of them came to Serbia: These foreigners have totally changed our market], 5 February 2024, https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/872481/rusi-srbi-posao .

5 'Russian migration surge in Serbia, 12 September 2023, https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/russian-migration-surge-in-serbia/

tions, as well as the stance that the Serbian government took concerning the conflict in Ukraine is multifaceted and often hard to understand. While Serbia did publicly condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and voted for UN resolutions that reinforced this condemnation, the Serbian government did not join the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia. High-ranking officials of the Serbian government meet with President Vladimir Putin on a regular basis, while at the same time, as investigative journalists have uncovered, Serbia is one of the countries supplying Ukraine with arms and ammunition. Serbian politics, thus, can be difficult to properly grasp, especially for newcomers.

In preparing for our research, some worrying trends emerged. The Serbian government started to deny requests for permanent residence permits, or to prolong existing ones to some Russian migrants. While some cases garnered high media visibility, many more did not. Some people affected by these refusals were Russian dissidents or were simply seen attending protests in Russia.[6] What prompted those actions of the Serbian government is uncertain, but their result surely caused the Russian community to be warier and more anxious. This anxiety, related to possible connections between the Russian and Serbian governments, caused many of our respondents to be rather reserved when answering questions, particularly about politics.

6 'Srbija proteruje još jednog ruskog državljanina, nije prošao „bezbednosnu proveru"' [Serbia expels another Russian citizen, he did not pass the "security check"], 16 October 2024, N1, https://n1info.rs/vesti/jos-jedan-ruski-drzavljanin-se-proteruje-iz-srbije-nije-prosao-bezbednosnu-proveru/
'"Ovde smo mogli slobodno da živimo": Ruskoj porodici Tereh preti proterivanje iz Srbije' ["We could live freely here": The Russian Tereh family threatened with expulsion from Serbia], 2 April 2024, NIN, https://www.nin.rs/drustvo/vesti/47362/ruskoj-porodici-tereh-preti-proterivanje-iz-srbije

2 PROFILING THE RUSSIAN IMMIGRATION TO SERBIA

"The family of our friends moved to Serbia two years ago [in the spring of 2022]. They told us it's nice here, that you can quickly learn the language… at a basic level and with mistakes, but it's enough for now… Now we tell the same thing to our friends who are still in Russia… The main thing is that after moving, we quickly felt at peace."

(Female, ≈ 45 years of age)

"I chose Serbia because it is one of the few countries where Russian passport holders are still allowed to enter without a visa. Apart from that, of course, it's quite schizophrenic that, as an opponent of Putin, I ended up in a country where there are many people who support the regime in Russia."[7]

(Female, ≈ 35 years of age)

Our research was centred on two methods of data gathering. We designed and distributed an online survey, in Russian, to Russian citizens living in Serbia. To disseminate the survey, we used the snowball method, using contacts we gathered with the help of Russian scholars.[8] The survey provided us with quantitative data that was later supplemented with one-on-one interviews so that we could receive better insight into what the preliminary data was already showing us. The online survey was compiled in April, May and June of 2024, while the interviews were done in late May and early June of the same year. Our online survey had 222 respondents, and there were 16 one-on-one interviews. The average time respondents took to answer the online survey was just short of 10 minutes, while the average length of the interviews was between 40 minutes and an hour. Both the interviewees and Russian scholars involved in this study face potential risk of being charged for anti-patriotic activities and/or losing their right to visit or return to Russia. To prevent this possibility, interviews were done by hand and notes were subsequently destroyed; the survey was anonymous and gathered only descriptive personal details (age range, education, general views…) which cannot be traced back to any individual, and the names of our Russian colleagues who co-authored the study were excluded for their safety. For similar reasons of general safety and protection of our respondents, we are not providing here further information on the communication channels that we used to contact the participants, nor where they specifically live.

"Most Russians immigrants are of working age, and Serbia seems particularly attractive destination for slightly older respondents with families"

There are several ways – sex, age, education, political views – in which our respondents are not representative of the Russian population in general. The first difference is that there are more men who immigrated to Serbia than women: they comprise 53% of our sample, whereas in Russia, they represent 46% of the population. Second, our respondents are on average younger than the Russian population average, which is 40.3 years. Nearly half of our respondents (46%) were between the ages of 25 and 34, while further 39% were between the ages of 35 and 49 (Figure 1). This shows that the vast majority of Russians residing in Serbia are of working age, with young men a significant portion of this group. This confirms other information about the Russian diaspora and is consistent with the claim that many Russians left to avoid being drafted into the military. However, while these data strongly suggest that the average age of a Russian migrant in Serbia is lower than the average age of the Russian population in general, other recent studies[9] indicate that Russian migrants to Serbia are on average older than Russian migrants to countries such as Armenia and Georgia. Additionally, almost three quarters of our respondents (73%) stated that they relocated to Serbia with their partner or spouse, while more than a third (35%) of the entire sample relocated with their children as well. These findings suggest that Serbia

7 'A one-way ticket from Moscow to Belgrade', 13 August 2022, Deutsche Welle, https://www.dw.com/en/russians-are-increasingly-flocking-to-visa-free-serbia/a-62792799

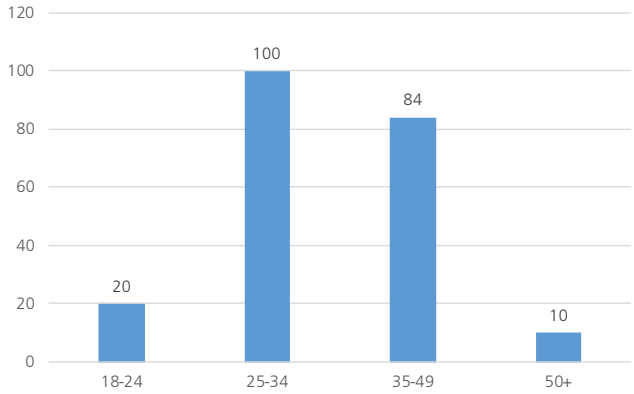
8 We owe utmost gratitude to our Russian colleagues for their generous help in crafting and disseminating the survey and carrying out the interviews. Due to worries related to their safety and well-being their names are withheld from the report, but their help was invaluable in its making.

9 'Russians in the South Caucasus: Political attitudes and the war in Ukraine', 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine

features prominently as a destination for older respondents with families.

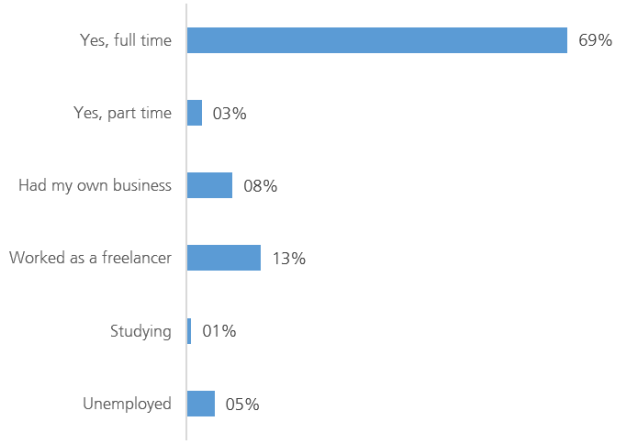
The respondents are also on average more educated than their compatriots. Thus, 85.6% of our respondents stated that they have higher education, including degrees at the bachelor's, Masters' and doctoral level. When we compare these results with the answers regarding their professional field, where over half of our respondents (54.6%) stated that they are IT professionals,[10] it paints a stark picture of an exodus of educated IT experts from Russia.

Figure 1
What is your age?



As mentioned above, most of our respondents are of working age, and over two thirds of them (68.5%) worked full time before leaving Russia. Less than one in ten (8.3%) said that they had their own business in Russia, while a substantial number (13.4%) were working in a freelance capacity (Figure 2). Only around 5% were unemployed before leaving Russia, a number that changed to just over 10% (10.6%) in Serbia. The unemployment doubling is a worrying trend in line with expressed difficulties of finding a job and securing an adequate financial status. Further, 15.3% of our respondents stated that they are still employed by a Russian company. More than a quarter of our respondents (26.4%) stated that they work in a company opened in Serbia, usually by Russian migrants themselves. A common trend among Russian migrants is to open and register a business in Serbia because, in addition to financial independence, this helps them regulate their legal status, since being employed or self-employed (i.e., owning a business) makes it fairly simple to obtain a longer-term resident permit. Finally, 23.1% of our respondents stated that they work, usually remotely, for a company that is neither Serbian nor Russian.

Figure 2
Were you employed in Russia?



10 This big of a share of respondents stating that they are in the IT field is likely a result of the snowball method used for finding respondents. It is indicative of a somewhat closed off group which forms friendships and acquaintances specifically through work.

3 IMMIGRATION TROUBLES OF RUSSIANS SETTLING IN SERBIA

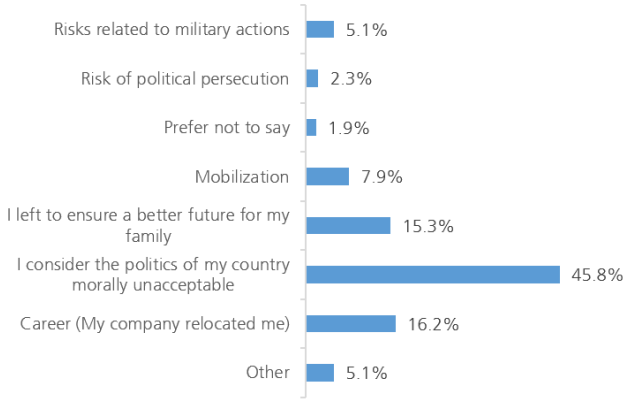
"I managed to get through the immigration with the support of a therapist. It is good that I had the resources to pay for it... I fully understand that not all migrants have such resources."

(Female, ≈ 60 years of age)

There were two major events around which the timeframes of our respondents leaving Russia were organized. Around a third of our respondents (38%) left Russia at the start of the full-scale invasion and shortly thereafter, while another third (34%) left around the time that the 'partial mobilisation' was announced. Those who left Russia during the first months of the invasion were more likely to state that Serbia was not their first-choice destination for migration, attesting to the frantic and precarious time those first months represented for Russian migrants. Almost 20% of our respondents came to Serbia in 2023. A typical respondent from this group is older, has children and a partner or a spouse and is less likely to be politically active than those who came in the first months of 2022.

For those who left Russia between August and October 2022, the factor of mobilization appears twice more often than among those who came at other times. This strongly suggests that the issue of mobilisation, even partial or potential, prompted many Russians to leave their country. By contrast, mobilisation is not the primary reason our respondents gave for leaving Russia during the period the mobilisation was announced. Across the entire sample as a whole, the morally unacceptable politics of Russia was the strongest factor for our respondents leaving it (45%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Why did you leave Russia?



When asked if Serbia was their first-choice destination, our respondents were virtually split evenly, with 51% saying that it was and 49% saying that Serbia was in fact not their first-choice destination. The data shows that the strongest correlations for those who considered Serbia their first choice was the factor of children or, better yet, family. By and large, those who marked Serbia as their first-choice destination relocated with a family comprising a partner or a spouse and children; they are between 34-50 years old and came to Serbia in 2023. This is in line with answers we gathered from interviews, as a number of respondents emphasised that they have heard positive things about the school system in Serbia, particularly the ease with which children can learn the language. As will be shown later, however, the language barrier presents a difficulty for many of our respondents.

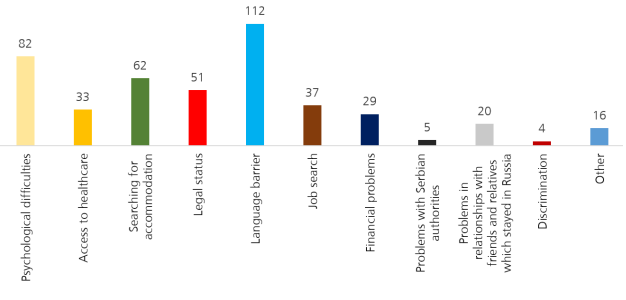
The language barrier represents the greatest difficulty for the newcomers, followed by psychological issues and problems related to their material situation (job search, financial difficulties and securing accommodation).

With their children becoming proficient in the language, many of our interviewees saw two-fold benefits. First, it helped them learn the language faster alongside their children. Second, the friendships their children made at school blossomed into friendships between the parents as well. Those friendships helped our respondents settle into the new environment much more smoothly then even they expected.

When people decide to leave their homelands, especially under insecure and stressful circumstances, they encounter a variety of difficulties. We asked our respondents what were some of the difficulties they encountered since moving to Serbia (Figure 4). As noted before, the language barrier represented the greatest difficulty our respondents experienced, followed by problems related to their material situation (job search, financial difficulties and securing accommodation). Psychological difficulties, when counted individually, were the second most frequent answer given.

Our interviewees pointed out that psychological difficulties were a problem they faced most in their daily lives. Some noted that anxiety became the background of their life, while others reported that it periodically hindered their ability to live, work productively, and handle immigration-related issues.

Figure 4
Which of the following difficulties have you encountered in Serbia?

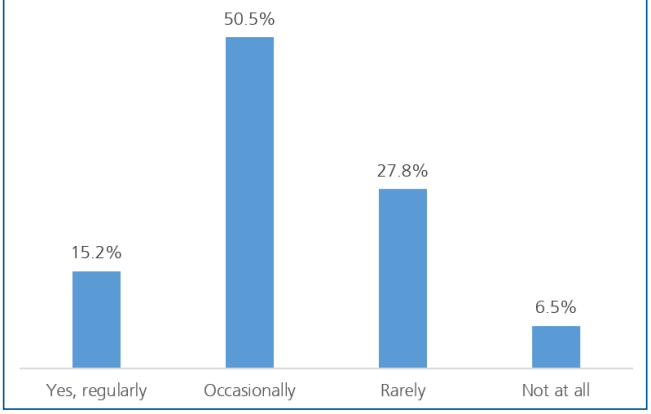


4 CONFUSION AND UNEASE ABOUT SERBIAN POLITICS

"In general, the position of the Serbian government on the war in Ukraine is not very clear. I've heard that Serbia supplied weapons to Ukraine, while at the same time supporting Russia […] Serbia is trying to 'sit on all chairs".
(Male, ≈ 40 years of age)

Expressing views about politics can be a scary proposition, doubly so as our respondents try to make sense of their new (political) environment. We tried easing our respondents into answering these questions by asking them if they follow Serbian politics (Figure 5). Almost all of our respondents answered positively, with 6.5% stating that they do not follow Serbian politics at all. On the other hand, only around 15% of our respondents said they follow Serbian politics regularly.

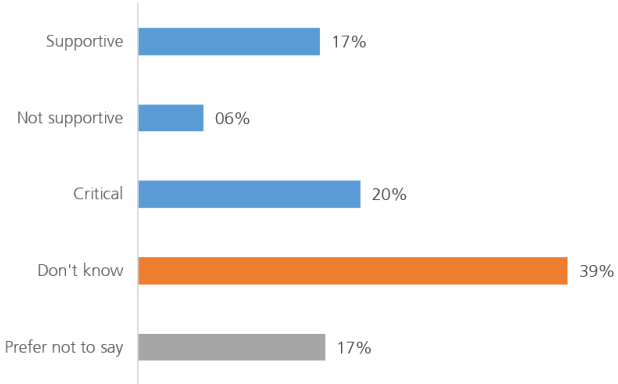
Figure 5
Do you pay attention to Serbian politics?



The follow up question focused on the attitudes of our respondents when it came to the actions of the Serbian government regarding the conflict in Ukraine. A big portion of our respondents (40%) said that they did not know what to think when it came to the actions of the Serbian government, with further 17% of our respondents preferring not to answer the question (Figure 6). Interestingly, the data does not show a particularly strong connection between those who follow Serbian politics more closely and those willing to give a positive or negative answer concerning the actions of the Serbian government. These findings could be attributed to several factors, chief among them being that the Serbian government itself has not taken a definitive stance on the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, pronouncements from different government officials vary, sometimes are even in conflict with one another, depending on which media outlet is granted an interview.

Equally, preferring not to answer a question regarding politics in Serbia could also point to a case of unease our respondents feel. A common concern of our interviewees was the potential surveillance by Russian intelligence services of anti-war Russians abroad or their activities in Serbia. Respondents frequently speculated that Serbian security services might be cooperating with their Russian counterparts in suppressing anti-war sentiment. Typically, such mentions were followed by hesitation and a desire to change the subject. Fears of persecution were usually linked to the prospect of deportation, but our respondents were not prepared to talk about their contingency plans, nor whether they had any should their fears came true.

Figure 6
How do you feel about the Serbian government's actions regarding the conflict in Ukraine?

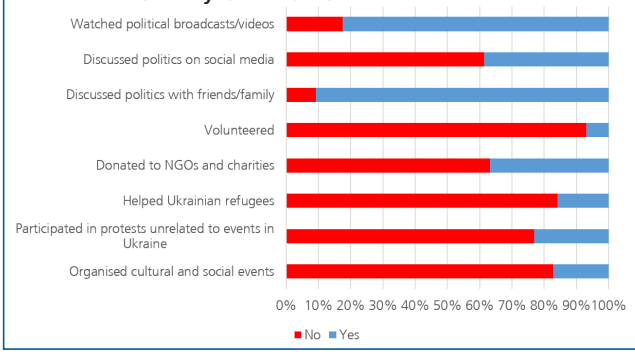


5 WANING ENGAGEMENT AND INTEREST IN RUSSIAN POLITICS

"I've reevaluated a lot. Many of my priorities have [been] reset.11 I don't know what I can do for people… for my compatriots. I help acquaintances. But all my previous visions for the future are now corrupted... Projects are no longer about Russia. This is not what I wanted."
(Male, ≈ 50 years of age)

Participation and engagement in Russian politics before leaving Russia was common for our respondents. More than a third (34.7%) stated that they donated to NGOs while 14.8% said that they helped Ukrainian refugees (Figure 7). Also, 22% of our respondents stated that they had participated in a protest unrelated to events in Ukraine. That number is significantly larger than reported numbers gathered in polls in Russia, which indicate that around 17% of those respondents had an interest in mass protests.[12] Respondents that stated higher political engagement tended to be female, between the ages of 25 and 34, and reported leaving Russia in the first months of the full-scale invasion. On the other hand, older men were more likely to discuss politics, either online or with friends and family.

Figure 7
Were you involved in any of the following activities in the 6 months before you left Russia?

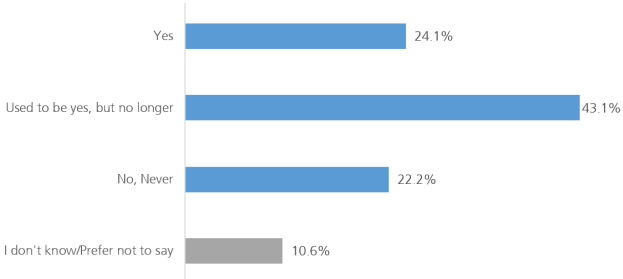


We asked our respondents a set of questions about their thoughts regarding the political future of Russia. About a quarter (24%) of our respondents said that they feel personal responsibility for the political future of Russia, although nearly the same number (23%) said that they do not feel personally responsible (Figure 8). However, the most frequent answer to this question given by respondents (43%) was that they used to feel personally responsible, but no longer do. This figure indicates a strong sense of disillusionment with Russian politics, a feeling of not being able to have a meaningful effect on the political situation in Russia. Studies of the attitude of Russian migrants in other countries[13] found the same trend, albeit in smaller numbers. For example, when Russian immigrants to Armenia and Georgia were asked the same question in late 2022, only 19% of respondents in Georgia and 27% in Armenia said that they no longer felt responsible for Russia's political future. The crushing reality of the seemingly never-ending war is surely a factor in the higher numbers of respondents giving up on trying to change Russian politics.

Many respondents express a strong sense of disillusionment with Russian politics, a feeling of not being able to have a meaningful effect on the political situation in Russia.

Our interviewees expressed similar feelings when talking to our interviewers. The sense of helplessness stemming from being unable to engage in meaningful public action for the greater good of the broader (Russian) political community was rather difficult for them to articulate due to the lack of suitable and widely used concepts.

Figure 8
Do you feel personal responsibility for the political future of Russia?



The same trend can be seen in the follow up questions we posed to our respondents. A fifth (21%) said that their political engagement decreased since leaving Russia. Respondents who said their political engagement decreased were primarily those who said that they used to feel personally responsible for the future of Russia, but no longer do so. They account for almost two thirds (62%) of the group whose political engagement decreased since leaving Russia. Likewise, when asked how closely they were following the conflict in Ukraine, 23% of our respondents stated that they used to follow it closely, but they do not anymore.

11 ['obnulilis' in Russian, literally meaning 'zeroed'; a term used ironically since 2020 and referring to Putin's resetting ('zeroing') of presidential terms to allow him to run for elections two more times]

12 'Protestnyye nastroyeniya' [Protest sentiments], 10 December 2021, https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/10/protestnyenastroeniya-3/

13 'Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine', 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine

6

POLITICAL VIEWS AND ATTITUDES

"The start of the war is an attack on a sovereign state. I understand that there are processes hidden from the public eye, but no matter what complications preceded this, the responsibility lies with the government that made this decision"

(Female, ≈ 40 years of age)

"No one is interested in it ending quickly. Smouldering, long-lasting conflicts endure precisely because they are beneficial to the players at the top"

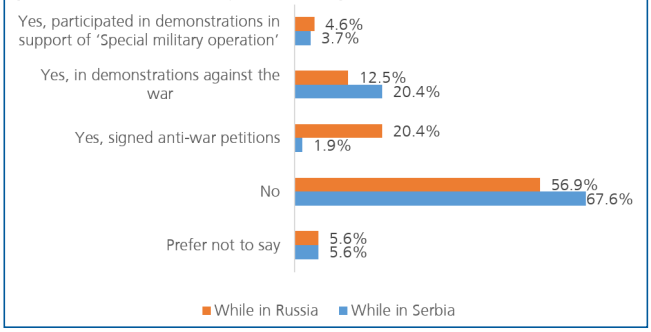
(Male, ≈ 25 years of age)

Although our findings point to increased passivity, less engagement and waning interest in politics amongst our respondents, one finding shows that this may not be the case entirely. When asked if they have taken part in activities to support or protest the conflict in Ukraine (Figure 9), 12.5% of our respondents said they attended anti-war protest in Russia, while that number climbs to 20.4% in Serbia, showing that despite all other data pointing in a different direction, there seems to be some uptick in political engagement from our respondents. Similar political engagement could also be seen during the Russian presidential election. In it, around 5,000 people voted, with media reporting that a huge number of people were prevented from voting because the only place allocated for voting could not accommodate and process them fast enough.[14] After the voting poll closed, people refused to leave, demanding that the process continues until everyone votes. In the end, Vladimir Putin received only 3% of the vote cast from Serbia.[15]

The majority of our interviewees reported taking part one way or another in various events, campaigns and other activities of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Serbia: most frequent were anti-war gatherings, volunteering, Russian presidential elections in Belgrade (it was possible to vote at the Russian Consulate), memorial events (meetings to commemorate the death of Alexey Navalny in February 2024), signing petitions, and donating to Russian opposition media.

Most interviewees reported partaking in various events, campaigns and other activities of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Serbia, such as anti-war gatherings, volunteering, voting against Putin, commemorating Navalny's death, signing petitions and donating to Russian opposition media.

Figure 9
Have you taken part in activities in support of or against the war (Russia's 'special military operation') while in Russia or Serbia?



Almost three quarters (70.8%) of our respondents believe that Russian authorities are to blame for the conflict in Ukraine. This figure is in stark contrast with the numbers in a recent Levada poll that shows 65% of Russians living in Russia hold NATO and the US responsible for the conflict.[16] In our study, 7.9% of respondents stated that NATO and the Western countries were to blame, while another 17.6% of respondents said that they did not know who was responsible or refused to answer the question.

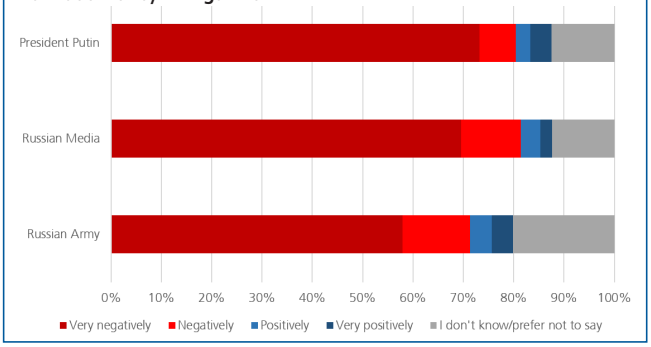
14 'Izbori u Rusiji 2024: Kako je glasala ruska dijaspora u Beogradu' [Elections in Russia 2024: How the Russian diaspora in Belgrade voted], 18 March 2024, https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-68591979

15 'Stigli rezultati glasanja Rusa u Beogradu, Putin „dobio šamar" iz Srbije' [Results of the Russian vote in Belgrade are in. A "slap in the face" for Putin in Serbia], 18 March 2024, https://www.danas.rs/svet/rezultati-glasanja-rusa-u-beogradu-putin/

16 'The conflict with Ukraine: key indicators, responsibility, reasons for concern, the threat of a clash with NATO and the use of nuclear weapons', 6 September 2024, https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/09/06/the-conflict-with-ukraine-key-indicators-responsibility-reasons-for-concern-the-threat-of-a-clash-with-nato-and-the-use-of-nuclear-weapons/

Our respondents were also asked to rate the activities of President Vladimir Putin, the Russian army and the Russian media (Figure 10). Their answers were overwhelmingly negative. The item with the most positive assessment our respondents gave was the army, with 69% of our respondents expressing a negative evaluation. President Vladimir Putin had a share of 77.7% negative responses, while the media was evaluated the harshest with 79.2% negative evaluation. Younger respondents were more likely to give the 'very negative' answer, while women were more likely to not answer the question.

Figure 10
How do you evaluate the activities of the following individuals and/or organizations?

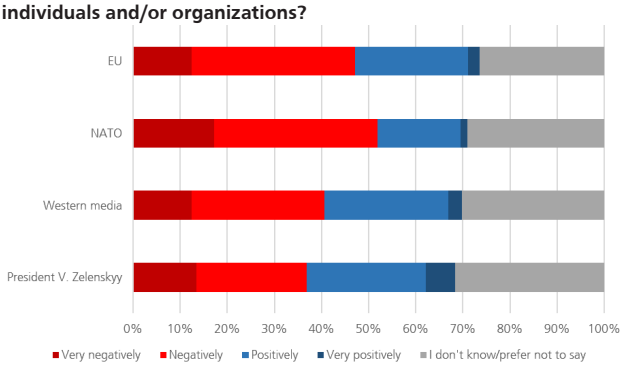


The evaluation ratings for the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Western institutions, like the EU, NATO and Western media, were divided, but generally negative (Figure 11), which stands in stark contrast compared with findings in other studies done with Russian migrants.[17] President Volodymyr Zelenskyy received a 30.5 % positive evaluation, the highest amongst all individuals or organizations, but he also received a 35.7% negative evaluation. This stands in stark contrast to the 66% positive evaluation in the study done in Armenia. The same can be said for Western media, with a 39.3% negative evaluation, EU, 45.3% negative evaluation, and NATO, 50.5% negative evaluation – all of whom received a more positive than negative assessment in the aforementioned study conducted in Armenia.

As we have noted before, the duration of the conflict, the brutality displayed and its seemingly never-ending nature, all surely play a part in the evaluations of our respondents. Our interviewees expressed frustration regarding the conflict, viewing it as senseless sacrifice. At the same time, they mentioned a feeling of being in at a loss when asked about its future development. Some of our interviewees also, expressed the troubles they faced with bureaucratic red tape and the uncertainty of success in trying to apply for a work permit or visa for an EU country, which surely factors into the negative feelings expressed towards the EU.

We must note that around 30% of respondents stated that they either 'do not know' or they refused to answer the question evaluating the activities of EU, NATO, Western media and President Zelenskyy, which represents the second biggest share of such answers in the whole study. Women were much more likely to leave the question unanswered compared to men.

Figure 11
How do you evaluate the activities of the following individuals and/or organizations?



17 'Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine', 3 May 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-report/russians-in-the-south-caucasus-political-attitudes-and-the-war-in-ukraine

7 CONCLUSION: THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF RUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN SERBIA

The war in Ukraine has triggered a significant migration of Russians seeking refuge abroad. Serbia, with its relatively open borders and welcoming attitude towards Russians, has become a popular destination for many. This study delves into the experiences and perspectives of Russian migrants in Serbia, shedding light on the challenges they face, their political views and uncertain future.

The Russian migrants who have come to Serbia are primarily young, well-educated professionals, particularly in the IT sector. Many have families, and there are more men than women among them (53% and 47% respectively). The overwhelming majority of these migrants are anti-war and hold Putin's regime responsible for the conflict in Ukraine. For some, Serbia was a first-choice destination, while others came due to the circumstances of their departure.

The journey to Serbia has presented numerous challenges for the migrants. The language barrier has been a significant – but bridgeable – obstacle, and finding suitable employment and affordable housing has been difficult. Moreover, the psychological toll of migration, coupled with the uncertainty of their future, has affected many. The migrants have also expressed unease about Serbian politics and possible surveillance by Russian intelligence.

The all round sense of precarity makes planning for the future difficult. For now, Serbia seems like a relatively safe place, but there are growing fears that this might change. Thus, the long-term plans of Russian migrants in Serbia remain uncertain. Some may seek to move on to the EU once they have a stronger foothold, while others, particularly families with children, may consider staying long-term. The influx of migrants has boosted the IT sector and created new businesses in Serbia, but there is also a potential for social tensions if the migrants remain a separate, non-integrated group.

Initially, the Russian migrants were more intensely engaged in anti-war activities and Russian politics. They took part in protests, donated to opposition causes, and voted in Russian elections. However, the prolonged conflict and the limited ability to effect change have seen waning interest and disillusionment with these activities. Nevertheless, compared to Russians within Russia, the migrants remain more politically engaged, with a core group continuing to actively oppose the war.

With regards to the war, the migrants' views towards Russia are overwhelmingly negative. They blame Putin's regime for the conflict and hold negative views of the Russian military and media. Although their views on Zelenskyy and Western institutions are more divided, they generally lean negative.
The most striking aspect of this study is the disillusionment that many migrants have experienced with both the Russian and Ukrainian situations. Despite their initial engagement, the protracted war and lack of agency have led many to withdraw from political activities. However, a core group remains actively opposed to the war.

This research has been hampered by possible punitive measures that the Russian government can impose on its citizens to silence critical voices. Russian migrants are thus in precarious circumstances. Their situation is further politicized by various discourses, both at the global level and at the local level in Serbia. Perceived social expectations can strongly influence the answers our respondents gave. For this reason, the survey, as well as the interview, opened with sociodemographic questions, as well as introductory questions about their experience in Serbia, and then moved on to political questions. At any time and during each question, respondents were given the opportunity to stop participating in the interview or survey, and were also reminded that they do not have to answer the question.

Despite certain limitations, this survey is significant in several respects. First, it contributes valuable insights into the motivations behind the Russian emigration to Serbia, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors at play. Second, the exploration of political perspectives within this community provides a unique lens into the geopolitical dynamics surrounding migration. Potential impacts on the geopolitical landscape can be discerned through the lens of the Russian diaspora in Serbia. Last, the findings of this research are poised to inform policy discussions on immigration and potentially influence academic discourse, shaping future research agendas in migration studies and political science. Overall, it aimed to contribute to our understanding of this complex phenomenon. Further research would be most welcome to investigate the Serbian government's perspective on these migrants, explore how Serbian society is reacting to their influx, and track their long-term plans and integration, all of which would offer a better understanding of the complex factors shaping the lives of these migrants and their impact on Serbia.

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RUSSIANS POST PORTAS

Mapping New Russian Diaspora in Serbia

Following the Russian invasion on Ukraine in February 2022 and partial mobilisation in Russia in September 2022, a large number of Russian citizens came to Serbia, where at least 30,000 of them still reside. Reasons for choosing Serbia vary, but the major ones are relative ease of travel and stay, proximity to the EU and western nations and favourable social context. Over 200 Russian citizens participated in the anonymous survey and 16 were interviewed in person.

Russian immigrants to Serbia are typically more educated and somewhat younger compared to the Russian population. Two notable groups comprise: a) relatively young men, with higher education, full-time employment in the IT sector and thus with income untethered to his location, and who mostly rents a flat in Belgrade or Novi Sad, and b) families with small child or children, often buying a house, enrolling children in local schools and more interested in blending in the long run.

The Russian immigrants are overwhelmingly anti-establishment, emphasising Putin regime's chief responsibility for the war in Ukraine and describe it as an aggression. They vote against Putin, are active through donations and petitions online, and participate in protests and meetings regarding Russia in Serbia. Nonetheless, as the war drags on, they are increasingly disillusioned about the prospects for political change in Russia and also somewhat disappointed and critical of Zelenskyy, EU and NATO.

More information about this subject:
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