When the Former Colony Becomes a Sanctuary: Russian Wartime Migrant Life in Tbilisi

By

Mariam Orjonikidze

To Be Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Social Anthropology

Supervisors:

Prof. Claudio Sopranzetti

Prof. Judit Bodnar

Vienna, Austria

2024

Abstract

Following full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Georgian capital of Tbilisi unexpectedly emerged as a prominent destination for Russian citizens departing their country due to critical political stances and concerns about military mobilization. The rising numbers of Russian citizens followed by skyrocketing prices in the city has brought to the surface Georgian historical anxieties over its relation to Russia, leading to tangible social tensions and a proliferation of physical manifestations in Tbilisi. Taking this tense environment into the focus, I sought to examine how Russian migrants establish and shape their social lives in Tbilisi, and how historical, imperial perceptions play out in reversed settings.

Throughout my month-long fieldwork, I explored "Russian places" in Tbilisi—coffee shops, bars, and social venues established by newly arrived Russians, serving as hubs for Russian social life in the city, alongside conducting in-depth interviews with Russian citizens residing in Tbilisi. Based on this research, I argue that this migrant group is characterized by transient temporality and economic privilege, leading to peculiar life-making practices that reveal signs of consumption-led privileged/lifestyle migration and entrepreneurship-led diaspora building. These discrepancies are captured by the neologism “relocant”, a self-defining term often used by Russian exiles. Furthermore, Georgia's historical subordination to Russia, coupled with its current efforts to westernize by demonizing imperial Russianness, has a profound impact on how Russians shape their lives. First, it intensifies social and spatial separation, facilitating the creation of "Russian bubbles." Additionally, it creates a social field charged with incommensurable perceptions of the other, leading to continuous struggles to reimagine and perform distinct identities.

Keywords: Lifestyle Migration, Enclave Entrepreneurship, Russian Wartime Migration, Georgia, Imperiality

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisors, Prof. Claudio Sopranzetti and Prof. Judit Bodnar. Your tireless guidance, insightful feedback and support have been invaluable throughout my thesis journey.

I would also like to thank the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, for providing a stimulating and supportive environment throughout the whole period. Special thanks to Ami, Ildi and Prem for their constant assistance and encouragement.

I am deeply indebted to the participants of this study. Your willingness to share your stories and experiences with me has been crucial to this research. Without your openness and generosity, this thesis would not have been possible.

Last but not least, a heartfelt thank you to my family for their unconditional love and support, and to my friend, who have shown endless patience, understanding and encouragement throughout this journey.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Since February 2022, following Russian invasion of Ukraine, the South Caucasus regional dynamics have shifted significantly, leading to newly emerging demographic, economic and political landscapes. Among the many significant changes the war has prompted, one of the most impactful has been the migration flows it generated. Alongside nearly 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the conflict (UNHCR, 2024), the war generated a massive exodus from Russia, citizens departing the country due to their critical political stances, concerns about military mobilization, economic sanctions and various other issues arising from the changing economic and political climate in Russia. This exodus has evidently "peaked" twice: initially in the weeks following the invasion, lasting through the summer, and again, in the aftermath of President Putin's declaration of a "partial mobilization" in September 2022 (Krawatzek et al., 2023). Estimates of those leaving Russia range from a few hundred thousand to a million, with the most balanced estimation being around 800,000 (Shirmanova, 2023). Although precise numbers are hardly attained, this emigration has undoubtedly marked Russia with the largest drain of human capital since the collapse of Soviet Union (Sergeeva and Kamalov, 2024).

In the wake of manifold travel restrictions imposed upon Russian citizens by the West, neighboring post-Soviet countries have emerged as a prominent destination for the wartime migrants, Georgia ranking among top three alongside Armenia and Turkey (Geiger and Syrakvash, 2023). Russian citizens can stay visa-free in Georgia for one year, with an unlimited extension de facto available through "visa runs"—trips across the border to reset the one-year visa upon reentry. This has made Georgia an accessible "safe haven" for many (Kakachia and Kandelaki, 2022). The exact number of Russian émigrés in Georgia remains allusive, as Georgian migration statistics are generally

underdeveloped and rely solely on border crossing data, which conflates tourist and migration flows (IDFI, 2022). Based on limited data available, it is estimated that nine months into the invasion, over 112,000 Russian citizens resided in Georgia; currently, this number is estimated to stand around 60,000 (Chigaleichik, 2023).

This scale of influx for a traditionally out-migration country with a total population of 3.7 million has been unprecedent, leading to dramatic reshaping of the social and economic scene in the capital Tbilisi, the major concentration area for the exile (Gavrilova, 2024). The arrival of thousands of Russians has strained the city, overburdening its housing and social infrastructure (Kucera, 2023). The sudden and ambiguous nature of the influx had locals and newcomers both baffled, uncertain of how to make sense of an evolving reality. Comprehending and adapting to an emerging setting was hindered intensely by the existing political and cultural divides among locals and Russians, the uncertainty of the future and somewhat novel nature of the phenomenon.

This influx has sparked curiosity among many scholars, quickly becoming the subject of intense study and policy papers (Baranova and Podolsky, 2023). Interestingly, the scholarship has developed along two parallel lines.

On the one hand, given that significant number of Russian scholars themselves became part of the exodus, they have immensely contributed to production of substantial body of literature and reports (Gavrilova, 2024). These studies, dominated by sociological approaches, primarily examine the socio-demographic profile of the migrants, their everyday strategies, political views and adaptation processes (Kamalov et al., 2022; Kamalov et al., 2023; Baranova et al., 2023; Kravatzek et al., 2023). These studies paint a very comprehensive picture of the Russian exile community, highlighting that it predominantly consists of middle-class individuals from urban metropoles in Russia. On average, the wartime émigré is young, highly educated with large networks,

professional skills and lucrative economic prospects (Kamalov et al., 2022). Alongside the economic privilege, scholars argue these migrants are quite politicized and hold liberal political views, which are seen as a major factor driving their departure from Russia. The nature of this migration, as many agree, is quite paradoxical, combining elements of forced departure and privileged status, complicating its categorization. This challenge is further hindered by the uncertain duration of their stay in host countries, as many perceive their exile as temporary (Baranova and Podolsky, 2023). Categorization challenge is attempted to be overcome with the neologism relocant, although the constitutive debates are still work-in-progress. While this research focuses on the exile community itself, the impact of Russian emigration on the host societies and their perceptions of the migrants is often overlooked, with Gavrilova (2024) being a notable exception.

On the other hand, the studies or policy papers produced in the host society exclusively take an external perspective. These works, dominated by policy discussions and reports, often analyze the Russian influx through the lens of its impact on local political and economic environments, identifying potential threats and opportunities for the host country (Kakachia and Kandelaki, 2022; Lomsadze, 2023; IDFI, 2023; Transparency International Georgia, 2023). In this rendering, Russian newcomers are somewhat equated to Russian state, are held collectively responsible for Russia's actions, but more importantly, for the domination patterns they reproduce in the migration experience. Such an approach often lacks the comprehension to meaningfully engage with the migrated community and grasp the complex nature of its unfolding.

While both immensely advance the understanding of Russian exodus and its effects on the host community, what they often miss to capture is how these two parallel lines collide. Here, I imply the peculiarities of Russian migrant group on the one hand, with its vulnerabilities and historical

and economic privileges, and Tbilisi environment, on the other, with the centuries-long history of being subjugated, continuous economic and political struggles, but privilege to be “the host”.

Myself immersed within the mainstream Georgian discourse, which is vastly resentful and unwelcoming of the Russian influx, my attempt was to contribute to breaking the pattern of separation that not only characterizes the way Russians and Georgians cohabit Tbilisi, but also the academic inquiry concerning the phenomenon. My positionality is largely informing the methodological and theoretical framing of the project: in an attempt to immerse myself in the Russian scene of Tbilisi as a Georgian, I embrace the awkwardness and tensions that come along with this attempt, which I argue to be essential in terms of potential unpacking of those tensions, hence moving forward.

Building upon this backdrop, I sought to examine how Russian migrants motivated by wartime circumstances establish and shape their lives in Tbilisi, and how historical, imperial perceptions play out in reversed settings. My research began with the ethnographic exploration of "Russian places" in Tbilisi—coffee shops, bars, and social venues often established by newly arrived Russians themselves, serving as hubs for Russian social life in the city. Throughout my month-long fieldwork in Tbilisi, I was trying to explore, observe and experience the Russian places in Tbilisi, while also conducting in-depth interviews with the citizens of Russia currently residing in Tbilisi, almost exclusively the reason for relocation being the war in Ukraine. Throughout my fieldwork, I have explored 14 Russian places concentrated in the downtown area of Tbilisi and conducted 13 in-depth interviews with Russian citizens who have lived in Tbilisi since February 2022. Entering the Russian life in Tbilisi as a Georgian, I attempted to put together the almost non-touching parallel local and incomer perspectives. By acknowledging these divergences, I aimed to

not only understand the experience and dynamics of building a social life in Tbilisi as a Russian but also to discern the city's influence on this process.

Relying on this research, in what follows, I try to describe what it means for wartime Russian migrants to build a life in the city where their presence is perceived as colonizing, and what it means to feel colonized in your home city. More importantly, what I intend to show is the perceptions and practices that make up this highly charged environment and materiality that emerges out of these practices.

This thesis is organized in three chapters, partially following my personal story of constructing, navigating and reflecting on the field. In the first chapter, I invite the readers to explore my somewhat spatially bounded field – the one of "Russian places". This chapter, through describing the essence, operation patterns and functionality of the Russian places intends to capture the life-making practices utilized by the migrant community in Tbilisi. First, I show how the Russian places are embedded within the city, as bounded spatial entities that are defined with double labeling and reciprocal exclusion. Treating those places as entry points, I then try to elucidate the economic and social practices that they reveal and reproduce. Doing this, I put forward the argument on how these practices are somewhat contradictory, marking the constitution of the migrant group as distinctly peculiar.

Building upon this backdrop, in the second chapter, I explore how Russians are forming their identity as a migration group through non-migrant discourses and theorizing the meanings behind various self-definitional concepts. I analyze the emergent category of *relocant,* and other categories that are contested and mobilized by Russian wartime migrants to reflect on their perplexing life-making practices in Tbilisi. To achieve this, I examine the emic discourses framing the departure

and near-future plans. Consequently, I describe how certain term choices inform perceptions of the destination and mirror their patterned engagement with Tbilisi.

The third chapter is an attempt to reflect on the larger historical processes shaping Russian migrant life in Tbilisi. In doing this, I reconstruct the historical construction of the identity of the "other" on both perspectives. I describe the Georgian discursive construct of Russian, as the "constitutive other", within which the *relocants* are placed, and Russian "metropolitan blindness" – a dehistoricized perception of Georgia(ns) produced through imperial/colonial imagination as oriental, reinforced by a lack of awareness of being entrenched in this mindset. Additionally, I elucidate the concepts of the "Good Russian" and the "Sensible Georgian," which serve as shortcut reconfigured identities utilized by Russian *relocants* to envision and mark successful interactions.

Chapter I – Russian Places: Enclaves of economy and leisure

1.1 Embedding Russian places within the city: Double labeling as a reciprocal exclusion

Since the beginning of the War in Ukraine, and as a result of mass exodus of Russian citizens in the aftermath of Russian partial mobilization, Georgian historical anxieties over its relation to Russia had been intensifying with a growing number of Russian citizens moving to Tbilisi.

On July 22nd, 2023, *Mtavari*[1] *TV Station* aired a news feature, titled "Russified Tbilisi" with an opening scene set in a coffee shop. The journalist asked the barista in Georgian: "*how do you serve*

[1]Major anti-government TV station in Georgia

the clients if you do not know Georgian?" The barista confusingly shook her head and answered in Russian: "*I do not know any Georgian(language)".* The narrator then follows up: "*If you go down on Asatiani Street and decide to have a cup of coffee, you should keep in mind that knowledge of Georgian language will be of no use for you as it has been long replaced by Russian in the center of occupied Georgia's capital"* [2]

This excerpt exemplifies an emergent genre of news features in mainstream Georgian media that portrays the looming threat of Russians taking over Tbilisi. In these reports, the proliferation of businesses established and staffed by Russians, which mainly cater to Russian newcomers by operating in Russian, is depicted as an almost horrific symbol of this process.

The wartime Russian exodus has marked Georgia as the leading country, not only in terms of the number of Russian citizens relocating but also in the number of newly registered businesses by the community (Forbes, 2023). In the 27 years leading up to 2022, approximately 7,500 Russian companies were registered in Georgia. In the year following the February 2022 invasion, this number surged to over 16,000 (Transparency International, 2023). Since registering a company does not require disclosing its operational field, sectoral distribution data is difficult to obtain. However, sample-based reports suggest that the leading sector is information technology, followed by arts, creative, and entertainment/hospitality services (ibid). Entertainment venues, though not the most prominent in terms of overall Russian entrepreneurship, often become targets of the "anti-Russification" narrative due to their visibility.

[2] საქართველოში შემოსულმა რუსებმა კაფე-ბარები გახსნეს, სადაც რუსულ ენაზე ემსახურებიან [ექსპერიმენტი] (youtube.com)

Figure 1: Anti-Russian Graffiti in Tbilisi

These narratives extend beyond news agencies and are also expressed by everyday citizens. *"Ruzzki Go Home", "Visa for Russians", ""Dear" RUZZIAN-speakers, STOP being so loud! TALK MORE QUIETLY!"*[3] - the old town area of Tbilisi is overwhelmed with graffiti targeting the "relocants"—as I would learn many of the members of Russian diaspora define themselves. The talk of the town has also centered on "Russification" through "Russian places". Such discourses triggered reflections not only about the rising numbers of Russian citizens in the city and their unclear relation with Georgia, but also the rising prices in the city, perceived as a consequence of Russian presence. Georgian citizens efforts to label and discredit Russian places included collectively writing negative reviews and publicizing businesses with Russian owners on social media to discourage people from visiting them. Although no systematic or violent measures have been adopted by locals, these individual efforts and news features capture the mainstream narrative which concurrently articulates resentment and fear of being crowded out by the occupant country citizens and deepens reciprocal exclusion.

Immersed in this discourse, I became interested in exploring those "horrific" Russian places, initially perceiving them as a narrative device within the Georgian context. To understand their

[3] Z refers to the Russian state symbol for the war in Ukraine

essence, operation patterns, and functionality for both Russian local population and Georgian imagination, I set out to immerse myself into the Russian scene in Tbilisi.

On a late Friday evening on April 12th, as Rustaveli Avenue was teeming with people protesting against "The Russian Law"[4], I wandered through downtown. Walking along Shalva Dadiani Street, passing bar after bar, I was searching for a destination yet unknown.

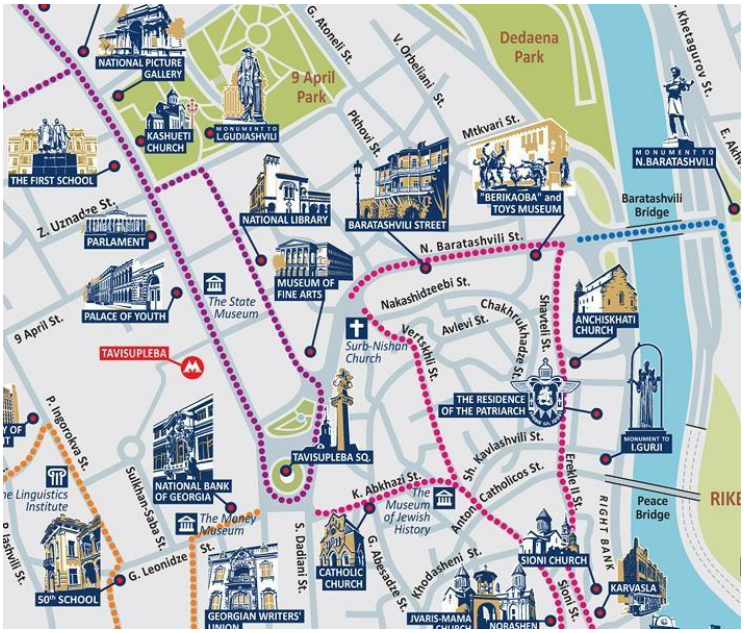

Figure 2: Map of the area

I had heard that many Russian establishments were concentrated in this area. What should I look for, I wondered, would there be any signs to guide me to the Russian place?

[4] On April 3rd, 2024, Georgian Parliament reintroduced "the Foreign Agent Law" after being forced the year before to drop the initiative due to massive public opposition. The law that parliament is passing requires media, nongovernmental organizations and other nonprofits to register as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" if they receive more than 20% of funding from abroad. It is denounced as "the Russian Law" due to its similarity to legislation used in Russia aimed at crushing the civil society. Moreover, the bill is perceived as a sign of strengthened Russian influence on Georgia, jeopardizing the country's European future. Tens of thousands of Georgians have been protesting the bill in the streets of Tbilisi, stressing on their strong position of choosing European future over the Russian one.

My thoughts were soon interrupted by a loud noise. Turning towards the source, I saw a crowd almost blocking the sidewalk, gathered in front of a small bar with a neon-lit sign – PITH. As I approached, I realized that Russian was the only language I could hear. Is this what people mean by a Russian place? A place where only Russians gather?

Driven by a mix of curiosity and hesitation, I entered the bar, trying to be observant without appearing too intrusive. However, finding a sense of normalcy felt difficult – not only because of my reluctance to intrude, but rather because my non-Slavic appearance and usage of English language marked me as an outsider in my own town. I sat on the stairs outside, sipping beer and smoking, when a young girl next to me turned to me, asking in a broken English – *can I have fire?* Sharing the lighter a few times, she soon breaks the ice expressing her puzzled confusion – *What are you doing in this place?*

Since this first contact, it seemed clear that Russian places were first and foremost places where my presence as a Georgian was distinctly felt and marked by both sides due to the almost exclusive presence of a Russian-speaking community. As I started interacting with Russian *relocants,* it became clearer that the idea of a Russian place, as a conceptual tool, not only operates as a Georgian hostility-infused narrative but rather plays a central role in the everyday experience of Russian social life in Tbilisi.

"*Russian place is mostly about the owners and Russian audiences who come to the places opened by Russians; you have a friend, or a friend has a friend who works there, so you are invited, that's how it works"* tells me Natalia, who has moved from Moscow to Tbilisi a year ago. The defining characteristic of a Russian place therefore seems to have Georgians and Russians in agreement and include the nationality of the owners and workers and, more importantly, the clientele. Building on

this shared imagination and reciprocal labeling, this chapter attempts to make sense of "Russian places" by theorizing their role in shaping and realizing Russian migrant life in Tbilisi.

1.2 Enclave ethnic economy with a twist of privilege

The phenomenon, where an immigrant community with a shared origin and cultural heritage forms a distinct economic enclave, has long been documented in migration studies and is often referred to as ethnic entrepreneurship (Zhou, 2004). Ethnic or immigrant entrepreneurship captures a set of economic connections and patterns among people with shared migration experiences (Waldinger et al., 1990). As Portes and Manning (2013) argue, its emergence relies on three prerequisites, namely the presence of substantial number of immigrants, their entrepreneurial experience acquired in the sending country, and the availability of the sources of capital and labor. Ethnic enclave businesses usually start small and typically aim to cater to the specific needs of the ethnic community (Greene and Owen, 2004). It is often driven by the immigrant's disadvantaged position in the host country's labor market, making self-employment a viable option. This process is further facilitated by culturally defined ethnic resources immigrant community holds and their effective mobilization (Volery, 2007).

Are Russian businesses a mere example of the well-documented ethnic entrepreneurship? And more importantly, is this framework a helpful explanatory tool for the phenomenon and its effect? A more comprehensive scrutinization here leads to a rather ambiguous picture. My attempt to the analysis first implies laying out the larger socio-economic portrayal of the *relocant* community.

Looking at the socio-demographic picture of the Russian émigrés residing in Georgia, few key characteristics are pronounced. Research focusing on the community consistently highlights its composition as notably homogeneous yet specific: predominantly young, well-educated, urban-

centric, and politically engaged (Sergeeva et al., 2024; Kuleshova et al., 2023). In stark contrast to the broader Russian population, the migrating group to Georgia is characterized by an overwhelming proportion—around 80%—holding higher education, with a significant number of IT specialists and artists, researchers, and journalists (Kuleshova et al., 2023; Sergeeva and Kamalov, 2024; Staske, 2023). It is worth noting, however, that this influx includes not only the most economically advantaged groups but also many individuals whose stay in Russia was no longer safe, especially due to the possibility of being conscripted (Sergeeva and Kamalov, 2024).

The economic strategies generally adopted by the community are deeply conditioned by the group's professional and economic profiles. For instance, the concentration of high-skilled workers, especially in the information technology industry, makes preservation of the pre-migration income through continuing remote work often in a sending country one of their key sustenance strategies (Staske, 2023). Another mainstream strategy is relocating entire Russian companies to Georgia, creating a small but more lucrative labor market for the community (Kuleshova et al., 2023). Last but not least, opening new businesses such as bars, cafes, studios and bookstores in Tbilisi has become another core practice (Korableva, 2023).

As the literature suggests, ethnic entrepreneurial activities become possible given the availability of not only of highly skilled human labor force but also of the co-ethnic low-skilled laborers (Zhou and Liu, 2015). Substantial presence of both in terms of Russian *relocants* not only make Russian places possible, but also create an environment where existence of Russian places become economically essential – as a field where entrepreneurial skills can be realized and as a market where less skilled Russian speaking labor force can also be engaged. On the other hand, the process is facilitated by the Georgian labor market limitations, including its primary requirement of Georgian language knowledge, in certain cases, nationality-based exclusion of Russian citizens,

and more importantly, unappealing salaries. For a *relocant* worker therefore establishing oneself on the Georgian labor market does not seem to be a profitable option as other practices listed above are more lucrative. Moreover, entrepreneurial activities are further eased given the flexible regulatory environment of Georgia – ranked as 7th in the world by the easiness of doing business (World Bank, 2019), it lays a conducive ground for business launching and operation.

From this standpoint, the ethnic enclave literature appears to be adequate explanatory tool for Russian relocant economic practices, to which Russian establishments can be considered as an integral part: they emerge out of similar structural and cultural circumstances, serve similar economic purposes, and operate through and by the ethnic community.

In particular the idea of creating a community is tangible in the bars my respondents have introduced me into. First and foremost, those places were often staffed by my respondents' friends or acquaintances. Hanging out in C'mon C'mon, a Russian dive bar in Old Tbilisi area, Alina remarks - "*This is also an expat place opened by Russian friends. It feels like we have a big family here and I know that even if I don't have enough money for food, they will help all the time".* These friendly ties with the workers not only translate into the homely feeling but also might include small perks like special prices on alcohol or a more generous pour of beer, as Anton, 26-year-old hotel administrator from Moscow shares with me.

The importance of personal ties in terms of viability of Russian establishments are not only verbally articulated by respondents but also visible in practice. Personalized greetings with staff members and within the attendees, collective engagement in conversations and activities make some places feel like private parties. Gregor, the owner of Kofevar, sharing his vision of the venue tells me: "*When opening the place, we made an Instagram live saying that this is our home, parents are gone and will not come back, so you can come to my place, have a coffee, cocktail, play*

boardgames and find new friends". Partially still adhering to this concept, Gregor is proud to have created a homely sense of community in his place through largely expanding the network he already had.

The metaphors of *family* and *home* are quite often used when describing the "go to" places and communities. Unfolding those metaphors, they largely reflect the feelings of safety, not only in its negative understanding but rather in the positive capability of being yourself. The latter, first and foremost, implies the freedom of speaking the native language, without being hesitant or afraid of triggering locals. Natalia, a photographer from Saint Petersburg, has been living in Tbilisi for more than two years already. Trying to explain why she feels more comfortable in a Russian bar, she says: *"You have so many stressful moments in your life, especially in migration, so when you find something where you can talk with people on your native language, listen to music from your and their childhood, and meet people who understand each other without the need to overexplain, you need just less emotional energy in this case, so that's why*." In these conversations, it is clear that the concept of the Russian place often operates in opposition to the Georgian place, especially Georgian bar.

The attractiveness of a Russian bar in this narrative derives from the perceived shortcomings of Georgian bars. In the first place, it concerns the impromptu "borders" that some Georgian bars and techno clubs have adopted: in the worst scenario, which are rare, Russian citizens are rejected to enter solely based on the *"color of the passport"*, as some would say; in other cases, bars have been adopting the so-called "Visas", where Russian citizens are only granted right to enter after acknowledging and condemning Russian violence in Georgia and Ukraine;[5] in most bars, there are

[5] For reference, see the "Visa for Citizens of Russia" that Tbilisi based bar Dedaena has adopted: https://dedaenabar.ge/for-russians; This "Visa" launching has become viral, followed by mass cyber-attack on Dedaena Bar, thousands of Russians writing negative reviews on Google and social media.

no entrance policies but just signs such as: *"By entering this place, I recognize that 20% of Georgia is occupied by Russia",* similar content often being used as a wi-fi passcode. Although rejection stories are rare, these signs are often perceived as unwelcoming by Russians, discouraging them to visit Georgian bars. As stressed by many, it is not because they do not align with the clauses, but more due to the belief that *"people there would still hate them, no matter how they would behave"* (Nikolai, 23). Additional burdens that come up in my conversations are the hesitation to speak Russian in a predominantly Georgian bar, or the feeling of being *"alienated"* or "*invisible"* due to their Slavic phenotype and usage of Russian.

This division is mostly acknowledged by the *relocants* I encountered. Anastasia, a journalist from Moscow who has lived in Georgia since the war, says: "*Georgians don't really want to see us in Georgian bars. They don't really go to Russian places, which is obvious as Russian places are more expensive and filled with the talks about how do we suffer in Georgia. So it's like it became like water and oil. They don't mix."* Notwithstanding, such evaluations often take a form of retrospective assessments, often followed by "softening" narratives, which include mentioning of a places that operate successfully as "mixed" or downplaying the role "Russianness" plays in terms of their personal place preferences.

In this regard, from the clientele standpoint, it is clear that Russian places within the *relocant* community serve a dual purpose: they unify the group through common experiences and shared backgrounds, acting as hubs for Russian social life in Tbilisi; simultaneously, they provide a sanctuary from the local, often unwelcoming, entertainment scene. To put it otherwise, Russian places, as an ethnic enclave enterprise, are not just an economic strategy but also possibility and means for community building (Zhou, 2015), which arguably also leads to forms of exclusion and diasporic development (Kuleshova et al., 2023).

While all of these aspects seem to configure Russian places in Georgia as a classic example of ethnic enclaves, one remarkable aspect positions them at odd with this literature. Unlike much of ethnic enclaves there analyzed, here separate Russian economic enclaves result in a very tangible income gap between the *relocants* and locals. In other words, these are richer and more expensive enclaves.

Whereas average household income within the wartime emigres varies from USD 2300-2600 (Staske, 2023), the same indicator for urban Georgia is only about USD 650 (GeoStat, 2023). This significantly higher purchasing power of newcomers, on the one hand, has already catalyzed a very unexpected double-digit economic growth in the country (Kakachia et al., 2022). On the other hand, it has significantly affected the market prices, hence the benefits of the economic boom have been shared rather unequally, reinforcing the economic inequalities in the country. On a Tbilisi level, especially with the absence of any risk-mitigating policies, according to TBC Capital reports, rent and real estate prices have been raised by up to 80%, the number of transactions and average transaction value (by 46%) compared to the same data of 2019, and spending on food, restaurants, and clothing by 156% (TBC Capital Report), leading to raising prices on products and services. On that note, it is important to underline another essential characteristic of the Russian community: economic privilege. These unique characteristics can be seen through Russian places and, in turn, shed a new light on them.

As the migration scholarship thrived for the past few decades within the globalizing world, some argue (Fechter, 2012; Leonard, 2016) that it has been biased to often exclusively focus on and reproduce the common imagery of low skilled and economically impoverished migrants that come from the third world countries and move, mostly continuing to live precarious lives in the North-Western countries. Out of these critiques, conversations have started regarding the need and the

value to also acknowledge and explore the opposite flow, which might be phrased as “privileged migration”. The latter is relatively new scope for the migration scholarship, although ones contributing to the field deem its manifold importance, including its potential in terms of better emphasizing inequalities (Duplan and Cranston, 2023) or exposing newly configured colonial continuities (Fechter and Walsh, 2013). In terms of content, privileged migration scholarship mostly refers to highly skilled migration, elite mobilities, or lifestyle migrations, broadly covering somewhat heterogeneous groups of skilled workers, investors, students, retirees, etc. (Duplan et al., 2023).

Privileged migrants are rarely recognized as migrants, but rather often referred as expatriates, resident foreigners or tourists (Benson and O’Reilly, 2018), both by scholars and in everyday parlance. Whereas non-privileged migrants tend to be focused by default for their productive economic abilities, in case of privileged and especially lifestyle migrants, their consumption practices and its interplay with identity is underscored (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014). Furthermore, within the context of neoliberal state politics, privileged lifestyle migrants are often celebrated for their capital, depicted as prospective investors in the country (Benson and O’Reilly, 2018).

The case of recent Russian influx in Georgia I argue can also be perceived as the migration of individuals who possess privilege, not only due to their economic means but also because of their origins from the former metropole. Taking into account the general socio-economic composition of the group and more importantly, their effect on the economy through consumption and entrepreneurship, lifestyle migration can be a helpful framework for further analysis.

To put it otherwise, Russian community residing in Tbilisi is not only bounded as an ethnic group but also represents a peculiar customer market, with a more comprehensive purchasing abilities

and, as some of my respondents would argue, taste specifically attained through their shared experience of white-collar life in more developed Russian urban metropoles. Gregor, a sales agent from Moscow who owns and runs Russian bar/coffee house in Tbilisi with his girlfriend, in an attempt to explain why the place is predominantly visited by Russians says: "*Georgians have different mentality, different perception of prices; These people are not used to the service. Pricing depends on everything from the service, rent, area and product quality and everything else. It's clear that in Georgia there has never been a coffee culture, and Georgians still drink black coffee and that's it. They don't need Ethiopia, Brazil, it's all uninteresting. The issue here is in demand: Russian-speaking people demand things they're used to, and when there's demand, supply emerges as well".*

Specialty coffee shops are one of the key subgroups of Russian places in Tbilisi, making up more than half of the Russian places I have explored. Sharing the impression with the majority of my respondents, those places stand out by standing on a quite pricier side, offering coffee on average from 10Gel[6]. Usually, coffee shops operate as makeshift working spaces with laptop-friendly policies, regularly predominantly attended by the Russian "digital nomads." Nikolai, a 23-year-old tutor from Moscow, sharing his love for coffee places tells me: *"Almost every day I go to one or another, I spend most of my time in coffee shops now. First, you can speak Russian there with workers. I go not to only drink coffee, but to spend time, read a book, work or meet somebody, that way, I feel calm in these types of places."* For many, like Nikolai, those places matter not only by their default product or service provision but also, as spaces where upper-middle-class lifestyle can be realized.

[6] The average coffee price in Tbilisi starts from Gel 5-6.

To put the discussion into perspective, while the Russian *relocant* community coalesces with economic and life-making practices of lifestyle migration, the Russian places, as the term itself explicitly states, still marks ethnicity as the main identifier of the entrepreneurial activities. But what is exactly "Russian" in these places and to what extent does the economic privilege affect its definition?

1.3 "Russian enough, but not too Russian"

When the scholarly tradition emphasizes the importance of the label "ethnic," it implicitly suggests cultural continuities between the country of origin and the businesses established in the host country (Pecoud, 2010). This focus on ethnicity and cultural continuity is historically grounded in ethnic entrepreneurship scholarship, which originated from studies on immigrant entrepreneurship in the US (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009) and remains to predominantly focus on marginalized group economies in the Global North, such as ones of Chinese, Korean, and Hispanic communities (Ma et al., 2012).

The imagery of the hospitality businesses for such cases are often tightly embedded in the ethnicity and essentially represent cultural continuities, usually reflected in "traditional" food businesses – starting with naming to menu features, such places center a certain ethnic or cultural identity (van Dongen, 2019). While the Russian places might align with certain features of the ethnic immigrant entrepreneurship, in this sense, "Russianness" is hard to find in the venues established in Tbilisi: they rarely serve Russian food, play Russian music, or are adorned with distinctively Russian designs.

Nadya, 30-year-old researcher from Saint Petersburg, talking about Russian places, shares her observation: "*I think it's like for the places, it's important to be at the same time Russian, I mean,*

Russian speaking, to be the comfortable place for us, but at the same time not to be too Russian". Nadya's words well capture the ambiguity of "Russianness" in the Russian places.

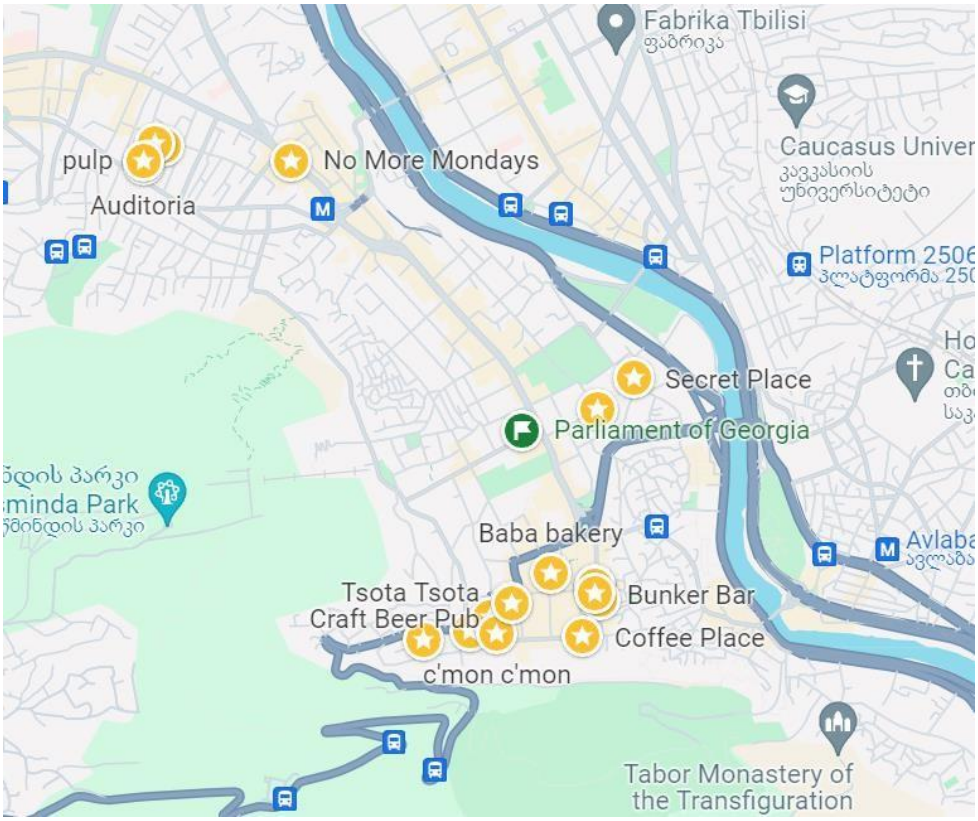

Figure 3:Russian places explored throughout the fieldwork

Russian places are primarily concentrated in two adjacent downtown districts: Sololaki, the historical old town that now serves as a key tourist area, and Vera, an upscale historical residential neighborhood. [7]The easiest way to identify Russian places is simply following Russian speaker, either literally or through internet surfing, as other signs are either absent or unreliable. Names, menus, physical appearance and concept of the places predominantly are blatantly international, without any reference to either Russian or Georgian locality. No More Mondays is a representative instance for the coffee shops. As they also advertise it on their IG page, the bar *is a raw space to*

[7] It is important to note that these areas were gentrified and functioned as entertainment districts long before the Russian influx. To this day, Georgian places remain to dominate the area.

highlight the raw taste – with raw wall finishes, usage of only steel, stone, glass, and tiles, the space seems very modern without any specific character. As for the bars, they either are characterized with a grunge-chic vibe or a more hipster atmosphere. In case there is no live performance, the music playing in these places is also mainly English.

When asking my respondents how they would be able to identify a Russian place, the common answer was only through going inside. On my end, I eventually developed a strategy: the lack of any localized marker became a marker, the absence of any signs a sign itself. The cosmopolitan "unmarked" modernity that Russian places are displaying substantially reflected the upper-class status of the newcomers and their performed lifestyle. But something else was at stake: the dedication towards cosmopolitanism can be seen as further facilitated by the need of downplaying "Russianness" considering the tense relationship with locals. And yet, precisely this process of downplaying any specific manifestation of "Russianness" still acts as a central labeling device for both parties.

Russian places simultaneously reflect the presence of the Russian community and the absence of a cohesive Russian identity. They showcase the constructive practices of migrant diaspora building alongside the destructive tendencies of tourist-like consumption. These places encapsulate both immigrant struggles and cosmopolitan privileges. They physically frame and embody conventionally opposing identities, representations, and practices, rendering the phenomenon challenging to categorize. Focusing on these intriguing peculiarities of Russian places, I am compelled to explore the constitutive discourses and imaginations of the migrant group that manifest in such a way, aiming to understand and make sense of these discrepancies. The next chapter is dedicated to exploration of discourses within which such paradoxical practices are embedded.

Chapter 2 – Between and betwixt: Identity of Relocant

2.1 Transience and uncertainty: In search for self-identification

In 2022, "relocation" was voted among top three words of the year in Russia, together with "war" and "mobilization" (Levontina and Shmeleva, 2022). Traditionally used in business contexts to refer to moving a company or transferring an employee either domestically or internationally, since 2022 *relokatsyia* (relocation) has emerged as a key term to capture the migration wave prompted by Russia's war and mobilization.

Migration is an integral process to social, political and cultural debates globally in the 21st century; we arguably even live in "Age of Migration" (De Haas et al., 2019) and along with intensified human flows, we have seen proliferating categorizations attempting to make sense of the emergent complexity of mobilities. Terms such as migrant, immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, expatriate, often further specified with additive adjectives, strive to classify and differentiate individuals' mobility by the nature of migration, reasons for leaving, temporality, and goals. And yet, with this variety of categorizations in hand, many Russians who have left, including ones I interviewed, decide to resort to a neologism to describe war-induced out-migration of Russian citizens. This chapter attempts to make sense of this emergent category of *relocant,* and other categories that are contested and mobilized among Russian wartime migrants to construct and reflect on their perplexing life-making practices in Tbilisi. In order to do so, I explore the emic discourses framing the departure, near-future plans and practices in the host country that inform the term choices and mirror the patterns in which Russians are constituting themselves as a peculiar migrant group.

When discussing various categories of migrant labels and their utilization, I address the analysis on two levels. On the first level, I refer to the attempts to rationalize the usage of a certain category. Here, I try to capture the definitions in construction, as aspiration towards finding something that would be an *objective* description of oneself. On a broader level, I consider these attempts as social constructs, which can be analyzed relationally. Reflecting on the base level, this type of meta-analysis I consider to be crucial in terms of unfolding discursive practices.

Defining oneself as a certain type of migrant is a challenging task for wartime Russian exiles, as inventing a new term *relocant* alone would also suggest. My respondents frequently attempt to attribute this difficulty to their unique circumstances – specifically, uncertainty of external reality and ambiguity of their internal state. The first concerns the hectic political and economic realities in Russia, which are beyond the control of *relocants*, yet this unpredictable dynamic continues to impose its uncertain nature on their lives. On the other hand, *relocants* find it difficult to make sense of their situation as various aspects of their experiences may align with conflicting categories of migration. Self-identification, hence, is a process, in which a person is urged to navigate internal and external ambiguities and find the defining markers that would best frame his/her state and its relation towards external processes.

Since the full-scale invasion represents a crucial turning point for those who left, the quest for self-identification often begins with understanding and articulating how this event either forced or motivated their departure. In my conversations with respondents, this naturally tends to be the starting point, as it was with Ivan. Ivan, 33-year-old sound engineer and graphic designer from Saint Petersburg, moved to Georgia in March 2022 with no plan beyond an expectation of staying

here for a few months. Two years later, we met in April 2024 and began our conversation with his attempt to recount the story of his departure:

*"On the 24th I wake up, laying on my bed, opening Instagram and the first story that I see is from my friends from Moscow, where she writes, I am ashamed to be part of this country, this is the first story and I understood that something happened and after that we all know what happened. First days, I just thought that I know where I'm living, I know the repressions will increase much faster than before. The essential thing is that I don't want to live in fear, I would just go insane, put myself in drinks and I just won't survive. I remember the word survive. And we are first two weeks into the invasion, and we were still full in shock scrolling 24 hours a day, when the law about the fake news was announced[8]. And my friend texted me, we just need to ******* get out of here. It was March 7th, we just booked plane tickets and left in two weeks."*

What Ivan describes here is quite a common story. Jarring shock, distress intertwined with a pressing feeling of urgency to take action. Conversations with friends ensue, sometimes serving as a source of inspiration, or platform for inspiring others. And although the thought of leaving has been lingering for some for a long time, the beginning of the war still marked something pivotal: a turning point at which many were forced to reimagine their present and future. And this reimagining was fueled by countless questions about how economic and political repressions would directly or indirectly impact one's personal life.

In a matter of days, future *relocants* like Ivan realized that they needed to leave. Need is an important word here, denoting the almost inevitable nature of leaving. What mattered was leaving, the destination not so much… What is the earliest flight that I can afford? In which city do I have

[8] On March 4th, 2022 Russia's Parliament passed a law imposing a jail term of up to 15 years for spreading intentionally "fake" news about the military, stepping up the information war over the conflict in Ukraine.

friends? These were the questions that many had to ask themselves. Ivan was among them and as he continues to narrate his decision, I think to myself, how these minutiae can become life-changing? I follow up with a question: *while making the decision, did you have any temporality in mind?* he replies, with a nervous laughter: *Why are you doing this to me?*

I could feel why this question unsettled him; many had already told me that the duration of their stay either in Georgia or broadly, in exile was inherently uncertain, often depending on how political transformations in Russia would unfold. Setting the uncertainty aside, Ivan tries to continue the story: *"I remember when I first came here, I got a message from my friend, asking me, what do you think how long are you going to stay there? I said a couple of months and I'll see next. And in my mind, these couple of months were like until summer or autumn. But autumn I thought is too long. Well... and after two years, we are here now."*

Specific stories and times may differ, but the confusion over the timing remains unchanged, which also means lack of clarity for self-identification. What are you in the new country if you move for a few months? A few years? The rest of your life? Finding the right terms in such an unpredictable horizon becomes therefore essential as a self-directed tool for shedding light on the ambiguity of one's state, but also as a label, a powerful device for gaining agency over how others perceive you.

"Now I'm a relocant," mutters Ivan, "*but I have to say, that long term plans are not popular anymore, especially in Russian community."*

In Ivan's framing, *relocant* is someone like him, who left due to anti-war convictions, continues to work remotely for a Russian company and to some extent, in anticipation of stabilization of the situation, considers the possibility of returning to Russia for permanent residence. To put it otherwise, *relocant* in this understanding is a unique term that manages to broadly capture the

migration motive, economic flexibility, temporal uncertainty and vague future imagination. But not everybody who adopts the term *relocant* fits into this picture and vice versa, some Russians who align with this profile prefer other identificatory terms. Is then *relocant* an overarching term or something that specific? When does one stop to be a *relocant?* How does it differ from other terms and how do this choice fit into the Russian migrant group politics of self-constitution?

Defining and labelling is integral to any process of migration as different discursive practices often lead to different socio-cultural representations and hence practices. Terminological preciseness is instrumental to migration governance, mainly implemented through creating official and legal categories (Torkington and Ribeiro, 2019). Alongside the legal categories, migrant typologies are further reconstructed, reshaped and contested in public and academic arenas, creating discourses that both reflect and contribute to the formation of social representations attached to those classifications (ibid., 24). Migration-related classificatory terms, as social representations, often mirror characteristics such as ethnicity, race and class, contributing to broader cultural framings, meta-communicative messages with underlying patterns of meaning (Van Gorp, 2005). Those terms, and the ways in which they are framed discursively, are inherently political and are constantly subjected to contestation.

War motivated Russian exodus has prompted a new debate around categorization, well reflected in my interviews, online community discussions, media and emergent literature attempting to make sense of the phenomenon. Classification conversations act as a battleground for diverse imaginations about migrants' identities, rights, and responsibilities, especially in relation to the country of origin and destination. While preferred labels vary within and in between groups, *relocant* emerges as a prominent term, although not as one unproblematic.

The term *relocant,* as described above, attempts to capture the uncommon mix of experiences – somewhat *forced,* or at least *hectic* nature of leaving, but the resources and ability to *relocate* similar life somewhere else; anxiousness induced by uncertainty, but also lightness that comes from the knowledge that *leave* is not permanent. Interestingly, in constructing what constitutes a *relocant,* implicitly or explicitly, the definition is framed through its relation to *migrant/immigrant.*

Discussing the terminology with Natalia, an independent documentary filmmaker from Moscow, who herself identifies with the term *relocant,* tells me: "*There is small confusion about which word to use here, but I prefer relocant, immigration just sounds much heavier, this is just a mechanism of psychological coping to not use word like immigration, relocation is something more vague".* For Natalia, ambiguity is what makes the term *relocant* precise, yet what is it exactly that constitutes the lightness of *relocation*?

"Russians use relocants instead of immigrants because they see Georgia as a place to come and breathe out. The majority of them are either planning to leave or already did," reiterates Maria, also incorporating into the discourse this peculiar perception of Georgia as a temporary destination. These explanations are at first glance somewhat shallow, but digging further, they also reveal politically and socially loaded perceptions of the word *immigrant* and hence the attempt to refute it. Scholars have argued that since the Soviet Union the word immigrant has taken a specific negative connotation in the Russian context (Purgina and Menshikov, 2023; Amyrian, 2024): either seen as referring to Russians "fugitives" and "defectors", or associated with peripheral ethnicities, usually Caucasians, including Georgians and Armenians and post-Soviet Central Asians. Now that those countries act as migration destinations, this awkwardness between the entrenched perception of the migrant category and the present twisted reality colors the use of the term migrant.

On top of these historical reasons for a reticence to adopt the term, the social and professional outlook of Russians in Tbilisi, along with their economic practices, becomes another ground to rationalize usage of *relocant* or *expat* instead of immigrant. Considering very high concentration of IT specialists and other digital workers keeping contractual ties with companies from the country of origin or the ones that have been relocated, usage of the *relocant* and *expat* categories are perceived by some community members and scholars to be more objective. As Geiger and Syrakvash (2023) argue for the relocated IT workers, who according to various sources make up to 50% of the Russian exile community in Georgia, the economic sanctions immediately affecting IT specialists' livelihoods in Russia have been a primary reason to leave the country, rather than political positions on the war. In this vein, it is argued that the *relocant/expat* terminology better captures the nature of the migrant group, as their migration and future plans are conditioned by the economic opportunities rather than solely political transformations.

Using the word *relocant* serves various functions that help to put the term into a larger perspective. Firstly, it sets the Russian community apart from other immigrants by emphasizing its non-permanent and economically secure characteristics. Additionally, it subtly differentiates community members from expats and digital nomads. While *relocants* typically enjoy similar privileges to those groups, this neologism acknowledges, to some extent, the externally conditioned limitations of one's agency over the migration decision.

Whereas ones resorting to this term attempt to rationalize their decision through various means, the term is often problematized by actors outside and inside the community. Russian artist Ekaterina Margolis, in her "anti-war dictionary" writes: *"Emigration is a choice, but not a panacea. Unlike relocation, which carries connotations of temporality and lightness, creating a feeling of freedom and practicality rather than an ethical choice"* (Margolis, 2023). Here, the critical stance concerns

how the term *relocant* downplays the role of ethical anti-war conviction in terms of making the decision to leave and instead, emits this light and depoliticized essence of the migrant group.

Relocants, in this vein, are condemned to have left merely seeking a more comfortable life. This irony-induced criticism is even widespread among Russians who stayed. Well capturing this discourse is a song "Relocation", aired on popular Russian entertainment TV channel TNT. The chorus in the song goes: "But in a difficult situation, you chose relocation, oh, that's why you were running in the morning. He became a victim of information and, under the pressure of sanctions, fled to where there are McDonalds, Ikea and PayPal." The song laments that the man who fled "for a short time to Ryazan via Tbilisi" exchanged "Buzova (Singer who performs the song) for Georgia."[9]

Against this backdrop, while the majority continues to use the term informally and formally (e.g. in academic work Tysianchniouk and Konnov, 2022; Aitieva et al., 2024), part of the community critically reflecting on the term seeks to contest its widespread usage and simultaneous dismissal of the term emigration. The argument made by ones self-identifying as *migrant/immigrant* is usually twofold: first, for them, using the word *immigration* centers the politicized nature of leave and unlike *relocant,* it clearly shows that reason behind leaving was not personal discomfort, but ethical choice to not directly/indirectly support the war. The second argument is somewhat conditioned by the first one, as it renders the vulnerable positionality of the Russian exiles to be more significant marker then their privileges.

While this line of argumentation is not always explicit, it informs the way my critical respondents frame their stories. Andrei, 27-year-old interpreter from Moscow, discussing the terminological

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiUh3cCatm4

confusion tells me - *"I take myself as political immigrant right now, as I left because of the war. I have no idea if it is temporary or not, but right now, I love Tbilisi and I take it as a home"*. Although his depiction of the temporality is similar to others in terms of not having any specific timeframe for staying in Georgia, his preference to use political immigration centers the decisiveness of his political stance, similarly to other Russians I have met who identify as a *political immigrant.*

But this is not just the matter of self-identification, but also an issue of constructing a narrative that would frame the Russian exodus, as a phenomenon and hence the community, as a peculiar type. This aspiration to contest larger narrative, in my experience, takes a form of subtle criticism of others, who refuse to use the word *immigrant* and attempt to show that *objectively,* the latter is the one that is precise.

This discourse is something I first captured speaking with Igor, 42-year-old teacher from Moscow. After I used the word *relocants* in the interview basing my framing on other interactions, he challenged me - *"I wouldn't say relocants, let's face it, we are immigrants. And I believe using the word expat is wishful thinking. I lived here for several months in a hostel, so I've met many expats, this is not what Russian expats look like. Most of the time, all the expats from America, from Denmark, from Germany, from all over the world, they were hanging out on the terrace while Russian IT guys were hitting their keyboards. We have different goals. Their goal is to entertain themselves, our goal is to survive, but to build a new life."* As subtly palpable in this excerpt, for those claiming to be *political immigrants*, there is a pattern of not only personal distancing from the "affluent Russian IT *relocant/expat*", but also extending the argument to be fit for majority of the group. While the mainstream usage of *relocant/expat* encapsulates privilege and uncertainty more than political/ethical stance, this minority attempts to contest this tendency through instrumentalizing the term *immigrant.*

This discourse is also palpable within the emerging body of literature, mainly situated in the field of social sciences, produced largely by migrated Russian researchers themselves (Baranova et al. 2023; Kamalov et al. 2023; Baranova and Podolsky, 2023; Chigaleichik, 2023; Korableva, 2023). While These articles engage with the terminological confusion discussions, acknowledging the fluid and contextual nature of varying categories and struggle over self-identification, the overarching framing is often *political exodus*, hence the focus on the political underpinnings of the migration wave, the challenges emigres face and their activism-driven aspirations. What this approach often misses, however, is the economic and legal privileged nature of Russian migration.

I do not intend to argue which term is more accurate or which argument is more convincing. Instead, what I attempted here was to present discourses, that are arguably still work-under-progress in terms of creating solid collective identity. These discussions illustrate how Russian wartime exodus has created new and ambiguous identities that people struggle to make sense of. The term *relocant* is an attempt to capture this unique identity, but for some, it falls short due to its association with privilege and flexibility. This conflict over categorization is often one of principle – people from similar backgrounds and socio-economic resources may construct their migrant identities differently. These identities, as constructs, reflect their class, motivation and politico-ethical stance. On the other hand, although less pronounced in the discussions above, these perceived categories also insinuate peculiar understanding of the destination country and hence, have the power of shedding light to the practices exercised in exile life. The next sub-chapter is an attempt to situate such attitudes and practices within the elaborated discourses.

2.2 Tbilisi in the eyes of Relocant

The terms such as *relocant, immigrant, expat* suggest certain socio-economic positionalities and temporal panoramas of migration, and consequently carry the ability to configure and reflect diverse perceptions of the destination. These perceptions, in turn, inform the normative imaginaries of how one should interact with the host country and society. Taking self-identification debates as a lens, below I try to understand how Tbilisi is perceived as a destination and how a *relocant* is envisioned in the context of Tbilisi.

Before delving into the *relocant* envisioning of Tbilisi, it is important to situate the discussion into politico-legal context, through which Russians navigate their migration. First and foremost, it is to be noted that Georgia is traditionally an out-migration country. 2022 has been the first precedent in the history of modern Georgia with positive migration net rate with help of wartime Russian exodus (GeoStat, 2022). The story of why Georgia became a prime destination for people leaving Russia is rather straightforward: in the wake manifold restrictions being imposed on Russian citizens, Georgia potentially granted them with easy access, safety, viability, familiarity, comfort and networking potential (Korableva, 2023). Although diplomatic relationship between Russia and Georgia are suspended since the war in 2008, Georgia has an open border policy with Russia[10], granting citizens of the neighbor country free entrance and one year-long stay, although unlimited extension of the period is de facto available through the so-called "visa run"—trips across the border to reobtain another year-long visa on arrival back in the country (Korableva, 2023). Similarly, Russian citizens in Georgia are allowed to work, buy/rent property, register LLC or individual entrepreneurship without having a resident status. Georgian state migration policies

[10] The Visa-free policy has not been reciprocated by Russia until May 2023. This move was widely seen as a Kremlin reward for the Georgian government's restrained approach on the war in Ukraine, while also serving as tacit recognition that Georgia is an important node of sanctions-busting trade for Russia.

towards Russian citizens [11] repeat the patterns seen in Global South countries navigating the complex paths of neoliberalization: reductions in bureaucratic constraints and special visa policies are "successful" practices such countries undertake to attract skilled migrants and investors from richer countries (Benson and O'Reilly, 2018).

Figure 4: Photo from Anti-Russia rally in Tbilisi from March 7th, 2022: "Close the border," reads the Georgian writing on the poster (left). "Fuck off," reads the Russian writing (right)

Georgian Dream, the current ruling party openly supports this influx, stressing its economic benefits, although often depicts the newcomers as *tourists*. Unfolding this state discourse is instrumental, as it conditions the way Russian relocants are perceived in relation to Georgia. In this quest, few important circumstances are to be noted: The political environment in Georgia has been polarized to the extreme following the Russia-Ukraine war, since the ruling party abstains itself from joining international sanctions against Russia and is increasingly blamed for pro-Russian stance (Lomsadze, 2023). The stance on Russian citizens is largely perceived as part of the warming politics with Kremlin, especially as entrance is sometimes rejected for politically active

[11] This politics also extend to other countries that are conventionally part of the Global North

anti-Putinist Russians. Emphasis on the label *tourist,* in this sense, is perceived to be somewhat symbolic, as the Georgian State prioritizes affluent *draft dodgers* over politically motivated/forced Russians. This attitude strengthens the apolitical image of the influx in local perspectives (Parulava, 2022). This context has further intensified internal political debate on the free-Visa regime with Russia. Since the influx, the number of Georgians who do not support free-Visa regime with Russia has surged up to 80% (IRI, 2023). Against this backdrop, the state criticizes supporters of the visa-ban framing them as xenophobes and blames them for *dragging Georgia into war.* Following the opposition party's proposal to impose restrictions on Russian citizens entrance, the ruling party general secretary responded: *"We have repeatedly stated that Georgia would not start a war or engage in a war. There will be no second front in Georgia [amid the Russian war in Ukraine]. Georgia does not join the sanctions. This is very important. We welcome the influx of tourists; I don't see any problem with that."* (Kakha Kaladze, 2022)

In this political agenda, important is to note that the state is interested in facilitating Russians to practice life that resembles those of long-term tourists. And although certain practices described in the first chapter resonate with this image, what is the imaginary on the Russian community end, that lead to these dynamics?

The long unreciprocated visa-free regime and overall asymmetric migration policies described above is quite allusive: it displays the dynamics where Russia is aspired for migration but has limited access, whereas Georgia is widely open, but is not seen as a desirable migration destination (Baranova and Podolsky, 2023). My respondents implicitly or explicitly confirm this thesis, rendering Georgia as somewhat random destination for their exile.

Anton, who has been thinking about leaving for a long time, but left in the wake of war, tells me: *"It's like Russian national sport to think about immigration, but not to immigrate, and I used to*

participate in this, but had Portugal in mind since I visited it in 2014 and I loved It. What about Georgia? I had connections with this country and guess I had to leave somewhere." For Anton, similarly to others, Georgia is not a destination of dreams, but one of limited reality.

The fact that Georgia is deemed as feasible, but not desirable as migration destination profoundly impacts the way migration experience is perceived within the Russian *relocant* community. Despite the enclave economy-based diaspora building practices described in the first chapter, various sources suggest that the percentage of people perceiving Georgia as a permanent residence destination is as low as around 15% (Exodus-22; OutRush; CRRC). For majority then, the country is perceived as a temporary sanctuary, either until Russia becomes more viable option for return or better perspective comes up.

"Russians really like Georgia, and many of my friends, they have businesses here now, like bookstores or cafes, bars, but many of them are gonna leave and they're just waiting for visas. They're seeing Georgia sometimes as kind of limbo, you know, like some place which is nice, but this is the transition zone." – tells me Anastasia, mirroring the widespread narrative. But what does it mean for Tbilisi to be a limbo zone, yet nice, and why is this perception so entrenched?

Going back to the constitutive narrative debate will help us to unfold the implicit meanings. While literal definition and etymologies of the terms *immigrant/migrant* and *relocant/expat* are quite similar, the discrepancies largely stem from discursive practices and different socio-cultural representations they are associated with: first and foremost, class composition, would it be objective or discursively built; the direction of the mobility, while emigration usually refers to Third World country citizen leaving for Global North and opposite flow is captured by the alternative; lastly, temporality, where immigration is usually understood as deliberately permanent.

These representations do not only render people on the move in a peculiar frame but also their relation towards the host country.

In case of Russian emigres, the way alternative terminology is instrumentalized emphasizes the motives of departure, while destination image and attitudes are vastly homogeneous, repeating the patterns seen in privileged migrants. In mainstream Russian consciousness, Georgia has a positive image as a tourist destination. As Makarychev (2022) notes, this portrayal renders Georgia as a perfect holiday destination: authentic country with attractive cuisine, wine, culture and sightseeing. These narratives envision Georgia as peaceful, friendly and hospitable country; however, the politically divisive context is absent from this commodified image.

"I really like Tbilisi. It's good weather, good nature, good people, really tasty food, vegetables. Oh my God. because I'm vegetarian. So, I'm in heaven because in Saint Petersburg it's plastic food everywhere." – Alina captures the emblematic perception of the city within the Russian community. Informed by the entrenched commodified vision of Georgia, Alina reproduces the discourse through narratively reinforcing it and practically engaging with the city through this logic.

It is apparent that the overall image of destination is positive, yet, important is to notice that these positive projections on Tbilisi and Georgia often carry a certain orientalist element: usually, this discourse exaggerates peculiar features in contrast to the central reference point (either Moscow or Saint Petersburg) and leads to exotic and romanticized portrayal.

These imaginaries are subtly interwoven into the lives envisioned here and are palpable in all interviews I have conducted, including one with Anastasia. A journalist from Moscow has been living in Tbilisi since the full-scale invasion. Whereas life in Moscow and the relocation experience has been exhausting for her, she contrastingly perceives her life in Tbilisi to be somewhat laid-

back: *"We are just tired and burned out and want to live our lives. Finally, we're in the country with summer all year round and flowers in April. I'm finally resting after immigration, and I want to rest a little bit more before I make all those life changing decisions again."* Anastasia again reinforces the *nice transition zone* image of Georgia here, which frames the lifestyle she embraces. Like majority of Russians I have met, she also lives in the downtown neighborhood of Sololaki, in a so-called "Italian" Courtyard type of home – signature pre-Soviet housing structure which now acts as a key attraction feature for tourists. This type of housing emits the romanticized image of tight community life, hence the metaphor Italian, as lively and open culture resembled the one stereotypically portrayed in Italian movies. Speaking about life in "Italian" courtyard, she tells me: *I have very loud neighbors, but I don't mind because they're real people, not cars. And there are a lot of cats. And there is an old lady who feeds them. And she also speaks Russian. So, she's my lovely neighborly old lady with the cats and says hello to me and to people who don't speak Russian, I say Gamarjoba (Georgian for hello). And I really like it, I can dry my clothes on the rope, and I could never do it in Russia and somehow this makes me very, very comfortable. I like this way more relaxed vibe than in Russia. It makes me feel like part of the tight community."* This idyllic image, as her aspiration to move also confirms, is not something permanently sustainable. Rather, it is a romanticized bubble that falls short when reality comes into the picture.

In this vein, Tbilisi is *nice* as a *limbo* place, socially constructed in terms of vacation and accordingly, some migrants tend to structure and routinise the "holiday feel" through their life-making practices (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). This imagination is strengthened by the exaggerated comparative vision to Russian metropoles, against to which, Tbilisi is depicted to be less urbanized, with slower pace of life and tighter communities, making it an attractive place for

breathing out. The consumption-led practices elaborated in the first chapter align with that perception.

This characteristic of the Russian *relocant* community vastly affects the way interaction with the city and locals is imagined. First and foremost, here I imply the lack of motivation to study the local language, meaningfully engage with Georgian community or participate in the city culture and politics. This is something also noted by my respondents: "*If I had the plan to live here longer, I would pay more attention to learning language and be more engaged in the culture, go into plays, reading books. But you see, if you're always looking forward to moving, there is no reason to integrate, learn language and things"* – tells me Lida, 22-year-old IT specialist from Saint Petersburg.

While for many, similarly to Lida, long-term integration within the local community is not on the agenda, exclusive alternative for practicing social life emerges to be the *relocant* community itself. As scholars also confirm (Chigaleichik, 2023; Baranova and Podolsky, 2023), Russian community in Tbilisi is characterized with very strong internal ties and mutual support, although the tendency to be separated, creating the so-called "Russian bubbles". This feature is generally characteristic for migrants of privilege, as they are less likely to assimilate; on the contrary, it is more often the case that similarly to earlier settler colonialism, they maintain the lifestyles and close ties with the country of origin creating something that could be called "expatriate bubbles" (Croucher, 2012)

"Russian bubble", as I would later learn from my respondents, is widely used as an emic metaphor to refer to the community life in Tbilisi. This bubble, although mainly bounded by the ethnicity, is further defined by the distinct middle-class lifestyle that Russians are able to perform in Tbilisi and are not only metaphorical, but also spatial, reflected in the phenomenon of "Russian place".

But similarly to Russian locales, bubbles in Tbilisi also exhibit some level of internal heterogeneity. Katya Chigaleichik, a Russian scholar living in Tbilisi, differentiates two main subgroups within the bubble: activists, artists and cultural figures on the one hand, who are socially active and seek some level of cooperation with locals regardless of how long they plan to stay in Georgia. Another subgroup consists of Russians who, due to unclear prospects and social tensions, are not inclined to any form or level of integration (Chigaleichik, 2023).

Here, again, the *relocant/immigrant* dichotomy becomes relevant – those who frame themselves as immigrants, aspire some level of integration, but the word aspire here is crucial. In practice, such attempts usually remain confined within the Russian bubble, not only because of tense social scene but also because even critical Russian narratives frequently emit historically ingrained imperial superiorities (Amiryan, 2024). Thus, bubble, with its bounded nature, is still entrenched in a certain social reality that informs the way the bubble operates and encounters the outside scene.

The tensions between locals and Russian *relocants*, which I have touched upon along the way, are sketchy reflections of the complex histories and discursive practices of creating perceptions of the other. These encounters can be treated as intersections where historically charged perceptions are both captured and reconfigured. In the following chapter, I aim to unfold these intersections and examine the myths and realities that lie beyond the Russian bubble.

Chapter 3: Beyond the Russian Bubble

3.1 Constructing the "other"

In March 2022, Nadia fled from Saint Petersburg to Tbilisi. On her first day, as she walked down Rustaveli Avenue and saw Ukrainian flags everywhere, she got excited. However, her excitement

quickly turned to confusion as she encountered graffiti saying, "Russians go home." Unsure of how to react, she decided to ask a random Georgian to clarify:

Nadia: Can you explain to me what this means?
They had a short friendly conversation, as Nadia says. Nadia only told me about the last part.
Passerby: Do you like Georgia?
Nadia: Yes, I do.
Passerby: Then the best thing you can do for Georgia is to leave.
Nadia goes on: "*During these 2 years, I heard this three times and I think it is the best explanation of the relations and the tensions between us and the locals."*

This short story captures the confusion and misunderstandings that underpin the brief and sketchy encounters between *relocants* and locals. Tensions are sensible, yet what stands behind them is often left unpacked, leaving separation as the only viable option. Below, I aim to reconstruct the historical construction of the identity of the "other" on both ends and analyze how those shape the way the *relocant* life is constituted and unfolded in the context of Tbilisi. In doing this I show how from the Georgian side, Russian *relocants* are placed into a much longer history of imperial relations that make up the martyr identity of Georgian and mark Russians as *invaders*; on the opposite, Russian *relocants* often erase that history and conceptualize their presence and identity exclusively in relation to the war in Ukraine and their personal decisions to leave Russia. This historical erasure I call "metropolitan blindness" as it is produced through the imperial/colonial imagination and is reinforced by lack of one's awareness of being entrenched within this consciousness.

3.1.1 Peripheral Nationalism

Russian newcomers are primarily signified and coded by their national origin, as indicated by labels like "Russian places" and "Russian bubbles." In Georgian national discourse, this marker carries meanings that extend beyond the recent influx, rooted deeply in the political histories between the two countries.

Russia-Georgia relations date back to the 16th century. Positioned between the Persian and Ottoman empires, Georgia's early modern identity was characterized by its Christian warrior-martyr ethos in contrast to the Muslim "other" (Jones, 2003). At that time, Russia, emerging as a significant power in the region, initially appealed to Orthodox Georgia as a potential protective ally due to their shared religious beliefs. However, this temporary protection by the Russian Empire culminated in the century-long annexation of Georgia in the 19th century (Kakachia and Minesashvili, 2015). Despite the autocratic nature of Tsarist Russia, importantly the empire served as Georgia's main conduit to the West, introducing European ideas to Georgians through its educational institutions, grounding the Georgian aspiration towards the West (Suny, 1994). While Russia was once perceived as a key source of enlightenment and part of the Western Christian family, this view shifted dramatically following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The discourse of a backward Russia as the "other" in contrast to enlightened Europe gained prominence. The forced integration into the Soviet Union, seen as a barrier isolating Georgia from its predestined place within the European family, further reinforced this image (Jones, 2003). Since gaining independence in 1991, a pro-Western ideology has dominated Georgia, paralleled by an intensified "othering" of Russia as the antithesis to Europe. This discourse has extended the state foreign policy boundaries, becoming central to national identity of Georgian, captured in symbolic formula "*I am Georgian therefore I am European".*

Regardless of Georgia's aspiration towards Westernization, Russia continues to play a significant role in Georgian political and cultural life, continuously attempting to exert its power. This asymmetric power relationship last time climaxed in 2008, when the armed conflict near the North-Eastern Russia-Georgia border turned into a war, resulting in creating de-facto Autonomous Government in South Ossetia, referred by Georgians and majority of international community as an occupied territory together with Abkhazia. Years later after Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts, 20% of Georgian legally sovereign territories remain to be occupied by Russia.

While neither the Russian Empire nor the Soviet Union are traditionally viewed as colonial powers, it is often argued that the statehood models they represented replicated similar patterns of center-periphery division, deliberately creating power imbalances that often aligned with ethnic boundaries (Tlostanova. 2017; Morrison, 2012). Georgians have continuously faced xenophobia and experienced ethnic-based prejudices and discrimination among Russians (Sahadeo, 2012). In the similar fashion, the modern Russian state remains as the heir to these previous imperial formations (Koplatadze, 2019). Here, I do not intend to argue whether classical understanding of the word colonial is true to adopt. Rather, I attempt to underscore the historically subjugated position of Georgia and Georgians in relation to Russia(ns), hence the continuous struggle for gaining autonomy over its identity and sovereignty. These are not only past traumas, but realities still lived, corporeally engrained feelings that are easily triggered by the different shades of *Imperial Russianness.*

Georgianness can be argued to be defined through the enemy icon of Russia. Yet, crucial is to note that the perception of the conflictual relationship with Russia is increasingly characterized by a lexical ethnicization of the Russian State (Kolsto and Rusetskii, 2012). In this sense, not only Russia, as a state is depicted as political "other", but Russian, as an ethnicity is equated with the

backward imperial image. This perception though mainly concerns the urban youth of Georgia and became significant since the influx (Kucera, 2023).

Russian *relocants* are predominantly perceived as carriers of Russian imperiality. This perception arises partly from preexisting notions of Russians that emphasize features of the *relocant* life fitting the "Russian other" stereotype, and partly from the actual practices characterizing *relocant* life in Tbilisi. The (neo)imperial nature of the *relocant* community is often argued based on several features: the a priori use of the Russian language, which is seen as an imperial expectation that Russian should be understood and spoken in Georgia (Muehlfried, 2023); the affluent middle-class lifestyle practiced within a bubble of expensive “Russian places,” reinforcing the local suspicion that the exodus is more about wartime tourism and leisure than anti-war struggle (Lomsadze, 2023); the economic impact of Russians enjoying a “good life” in Georgia, particularly concerning the skyrocketing prices they have caused; a lack of awareness and interest in politics, especially regarding engagement with Georgian-Russian relations (Edwards, 2023). This perception though is to an extent mythologized as the *relocant* group has smaller, but politically and socially quite active sub-communities, who has pursued anti-War activities, volunteering activities, attempted to engage in local politics and be more reflective (Korableva, 2023). This aspect is often disregarded by locals, not only due to ethnic bias but also because such efforts are limited in scope, operating primarily in Russian and supported by only a smaller fraction of the *relocant* community (Chigaleichik, 2023).

Figure 5: Anti-Russian Graffiti in Tbilisi

Viewed through this lens, many Tbilisians, like the passerby interacting with Nadya, are not receptive of the large-scale Russian presence and are particularly wary of it becoming a long-term phenomenon. They fear it could lead to increased Russian propaganda, soft power, and potentially encourage Russian aggression (Kakachia and Kandelaki, 2022).

It is not surprising, then, that many Russians, including my respondents, often do not feel welcome in Tbilisi. However, the lack of meaningful interaction and the mythologized perceptions of the "other" from both sides often distort understanding of what is beyond that, leading to skewed and incompatible perceptions of reality. And here, similarly, it is crucial to ground Russian *relocant* perceptions of those tensions within the larger discursive practices and historically constructed images of the other as well.

3.1.2 Metropolitan Blindness

In this quest, first, it is important to note that while the history between the two countries has significantly shaped Georgian statehood and national identity, it represents only a brief chapter in

Russia's historical narrative (Kolsto and Rusetskii, 2012). Hence, whereas in Georgian consciousness, Russia is the country against which it seeks to define itself, conversely, in Russian consciousness, Georgia is merely a somewhat pleasant country to the south. If this primarily means that Russians, including the ones coming to Georgia predominantly lack the factual knowledge about long and bloody struggles of Georgia to resist Russian domination, what is even more sensible is the genuine struggle to comprehend the level to which these histories are often personally significant to locals. In my interviews, there are several patterns signaling that: first, there is a common practice of downplaying the importance of the peculiar Georgian context in terms of how Russian presence is perceived and responded – "Russians are also not welcome anywhere else, so it is quite the same everywhere", "It is not about our Russianness, Georgians generally don't like foreigners" are few among the narratives. Alongside, there is a widespread belief that the hostility discourse is exaggerated, especially in the online scene, while reality is much milder. To reinforce this image of "exaggerated hostility", one mythical story is told by every single one of my respondents: tale about Russian(s) who make most of the anti-Russian graffiti in Tbilisi, insinuating that this form of urban protest is not about Georgians being triggered by Russian presence but some Russians trying to intimidate others or exercise their decolonial aspirations in this way. While some might argue that this is willful ignorance, utilized as a self-protective strategy, it is also to be considered that metropolitan upbringing often unconsciously obscures and limits the imaginations beyond the one produced within the center.

Alongside historical ignorance, the metropolitan perspective on Georgia also features orientalizing tendencies, as noted above in chapter 2.2. Whereas often emphasis is made on the positive depiction of the country and people, simultaneously this rendering implicitly entails elements of backwardness – not only economic and technological, but also cultural. Russian *relocants* I spoke

with very subtly reveal such prejudices along the way. Often, the word under which Georgian culture was framed by my respondents was "conservative", but it was difficult to understand exactly what they meant behind that. It was in my conversation with Andrei, 27-year-old philologist from Moscow that we tried to unpack these meanings. Andrei started with an anecdotal joke, apparently popular in Russia:

Directors of the New York and Moscow Disneyland were arguing over which one had more terrific "Room of horror". Moscow Disneyland directors enters the American one and finds all sorts of skeletons, ghosts – so, nothing interesting. Now an American comes to us and sees a long dark corridor, and at the very end Georgian is sitting, holding a burning candle in his hand.

Georgian asks: Did you wash your butt?

American answers with yes. The Georgian silently puts out the candle.

This was my first time hearing the anecdote and taken aback for a moment, not knowing what to make out of this, regardless, we continue to talk. Andrei tells me, that the stereotypical Georgian is imagined to be a "man of the mountains", Caucasian fighter, but slightly in a derogatory sense of an uncultured one. This stereotype portrays Georgian as somebody, whom you cannot make a joke with, as his cultural level cannot comprehend it; rather, his fragile ego is easily agitated and his pure violent nature automatically resorts to physical fight.

Depiction of Georgian as a primitive "savage" has long history in Russian discourse. In 1879, a soldier participating to the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus portrayed Caucasians as such: "A mountaineer (gorets), a slave to tradition, is prideful, insidious, cunning, and systematically ignoble; he is not devoid of natural mental abilities, but these abilities have been given a false direction in the environment in which they developed." (Gorgadze, 2003) Throughout Russian Imperial rule, this image was reinforced in the mainstream Russian literature as well. Canonic Russian writers depicting Georgia including Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Griboedov, Mikhail

Lermontov, created this projection of country that is "yet to be civilized". This projection stood on the understanding that Georgia, due to its location and long history of being annexed by Islamic empires, was more Asiatic, implied as standing on a lower rung of civilization than the Europeanized self; Imperial Russia through this was trying to reinforce their progressive identity by projecting "wildness" to the Caucasians. This included ascribing this machismo nature to the Caucasian men, but also, irrational and impotent laziness, justifying the need to intervene in order to protect the Christian land (Layton, 1992). Although Soviet ethno-nationalist politics inherently differed from the one of the predecessors, as ideologically it was underpinned by distinct progressivist image, the classification of Georgians and other Caucasian groups largely relied on the ethnographic knowledge produced during the imperial period, hence to some extent, the discourse of Caucasus as a wild, lazy and backward Orient within the Soviet progressivist project remained relevant (Hirsch, 2005).

Hence, "Conservative" here can be treated as polite way of denoting that Georgian is still "a slave to tradition". In the interviews, negative connotations more often target men, rendering them as lazy, aggressive and Asiatic. Orientalization of Georgia stands at odds with Georgian self-identification: while it defines itself as European denoting Russia as anti-European "other", in many of the Russian's perspective, it is vice-versa: *Georgia has never been Europe and the Georgians are in no way Europeans. There is nothing dishonourable about this: Asians deserve respect and admiration no less than Europeans (Reznikov, 2008).*

Together with the imperial history, such prejudices are not reflected or problematized by either my respondents or Russian scholars writing about the phenomenon. This ignorance is what I call the "metropolitan blindness" here.

While the history with Georgia is neglected and certain imperially produced discourses are reinforced by Russian *relocants*, what they find decisive in terms of distancing from the Imperial image of Russia is denouncing the war in Ukraine. Russian Imperial history, in this way, is collapsed into one event, deeming it as a decisive momentum. For *relocants*, this has been the event that touched them personally, although this is not only a localized self-reflection, but the extent to which war in Ukraine has been resonant globally also plays a pivotal role. For Russians who even potentially consider to leave for the West, explicit opposition to the war is established as a ground rule by Western forces (Gavrilova, 2024). *Relocants* in Tbilisi often have Ukrainian flags in Russian places, find it necessary to underscore anti-War position in the conversations, and feel genuinely surprised when Georgians remain to be suspicious of their anti-Imperiality.

Imperial and colonial histories are of continuous relevance to how privileged migrants from the Global North incorporate themselves into the former colonized societies. These colonial continuities in terms of migration might take many different forms: these legacies usually include pre-established and traduced attitudes and imaginations of the "other". Such ideological continuities might be phrased as "colonial imagination, as Korpela (2013) and Leggett (2013) put it, referring to the ethnically stereotyped thinking that comes into play in privileged migrant life-making. Often, migrants from the metropole do not regard themselves as part of colonial histories, even though they reproduce similar attitudes and practices of settler colonialists. Instead, they tend to disregard their past through maintaining the image of individuality and uniqueness (Fechter and Walsh, 2013). It is also noted that negative stereotyping of the other is nowadays often twisted in problematic ways and might include romanticization of the colonized culture and land, but simultaneously separating them from actual people, with whom strong social distance is maintained and explained in terms of cultural differences (Korpela, 2010).

The way Georgians and Russians perceive each other are deeply engrained in political and cultural discourses that are in the process of construction for centuries, although, these perceptions are vastly stereotyped and mythologized. The Georgian depiction of Russian, as an Imperial "other", which is economically privileged and culturally backward, reinforces the imagination of the whole *relocant* community in this discourse, hence, does not open a space within which the interaction can become possible. On the other hand, Russians being ignorant of their historically privileged position do not fully comprehend the hostility directed towards them, and often find themselves disappointed when they are equated with Russian Imperiality, hence, prefer to refrain themselves from intense interaction and instead, try to separate spatially and socially as a bubble. Regardless, there are certain intersections where the interactions become either required or possibly imagined – it is at these intersections that Russians are somewhat forced to reimagine their identities to overcome the tensions and make the interaction possible. Below, I attempt to elaborate the concepts of "Good Russian" and "sensible Georgian", which act as reconfigured identities utilized by Russian *relocants* which ideally could make the interaction possible. I will argue how these frameworks are used to imagine a possibly better future and to what extent do they really work.

3.2 Good Russian and Sensible Georgian – Future vision

Georgia is not the country that most Russians perceive as a final destination, yet the people I meet have been here for about two years and plan to stay for at least another 1-3 years. Regardless, as many tell me, I am among the few Georgians they have meaningfully interacted with throughout their stay. Hence, during our conversations, they often express concerns about their inability to engage with locals, being aware of the rigid bubbles they inhabit. And as a perceived representative of the "Georgian side," I am frequently asked: Where can we meet Georgians? How can we connect with Georgian artists? How do we make friends with Georgians?

I often struggled to answer these questions and instead asked about their experiences of such attempts and imagined ideals. The shared experiences were usually limited but revealed interesting peculiarities. First, it is to be noted that for most, interaction with locals is limited to interactions with “borderline” communities such as taxi drivers, service employees, landlords. But even telling these everyday sporadic stories, my respondents find it essential to mark themselves as ones who are aware – aware of the tense social reality, troubled history and reflecting on that, are the ones reconfiguring their practices accordingly. As some would put otherwise, they try to imply that they are the “Good Russians”.

Chigaleichik (2023) and Gavrilova (2024) describe the "Good Russian" as someone who aims to disassociate from the Imperial Russian image by respecting host communities and consciously condemning the colonial practices and ideologies their country has established. Being a "Good Russian" involves following basic rules, partially dictated by the host community but ultimately interpreted by Russians themselves. For my respondents, being a “Good Russian”, first and foremost, means allowing Georgians to speak either in English or Russian instead of starting conversations in Russian; second ground rule is opposing the war in Ukraine, condemning Putin, volunteering or financially helping Ukrainian refugees, and finally, understanding Georgia's historical struggles with Russia and being empathetic of Georgians.

A “Good Russian” acknowledges his/her responsibility for Russian state actions, which, in this rendering, is deemed to be self-evident in their decision to leave Russia and choice to practice these rules listed above. Here comes the paradox: the way being a “Good Russian” is understood by one performing it is imagined to be ubiquitous and should not be challenged in any way. Many narratives first mark the awareness as a sign of being a “Good Russian” but are followed with

stories were getting a question about the reason one has left for or Georgian occupation is perceived as provoking and rude.

Natalia encapsulates this with her formula: “If you behave as a good person, you receive the same from adequate people.” Thus, a "Good Russian" needs an "adequate" Georgian who does not challenge their decency with provocative questions or express resentment towards Russians. In reality, the effectiveness of this formula falls short, as instead of collaborative efforts to actually unpack the histories that lead up to “othering” practices, it offers superficial shortcuts that still stand on one-sided projections.

Reflecting on the usefulness of the “Good Russian” category, Chigaleichik (2023) and Gavrilova (2024) also note that the actual decolonial potential of the practice is rather limited. It rarely goes beyond slogans and not only fails to achieve its intended goals but also divides the Russian community itself.

Struggle to meaningfully engage and tone down the tensions continues, but future imaginations are also being limited by unsuccessful experiences. Many thinks that it is matter of time, as those who would choose to stay would eventually be able to go beyond the metaphorical and spatial wall that is now hindering the interactions. Some deem the importance of having dialogues, taking the efforts to demolish the bubbles. Yet, no force willing to take that toll is to be seen on the horizon, keeping the future prospects uncertain.

Conclusion

So, what happens when the former colony becomes a sanctuary?

There is no easy way to answer this question, as encounters in a twisted social scene simultaneously bring to the surface troubled histories, unsettle historically produced and entrenched categories, yet do not provide the space for reconfiguring strained relationship in a meaningful way.

The story that I have told is first and foremost, the one of Russian migrants, who attempt to build a life in Tbilisi. Relocating to Tbilisi, would it be in quest for comfortable lifestyle or safe refuge from the potential life threat, was in neither case decision made fully voluntarily. For the Russians who have left, the uprooting experience has been unsettling, especially given the limited time and prospects. Uncertainty is ubiquitous experience when it comes to the future, as it is often perceived to be beyond their control. Limited agency is preventing them from being fully-determined, hence, the word *relocant* they prefer to use is, one with no loaded meanings yet. But is it still this empty buzzword? I would say no. The way it has been utilized has provided a sense of who a *relocant* is, and I think the simplest way to put it is – (indirectly) forced expat.

This oxymoronic combination of the words best captures that Russian *relocants* are the ones who can afford the migration. On the ground, it means that regardless the vulnerability of being forced to live in a country which would not be otherwise chosen as an emigration destination, *relocants* have the privilege to build a lifestyle that would fit the idyllic image. This imagination is made possible through the imperially produced image of Georgia, which depoliticizes and Orientalizes the country. If on the one hand, this type of engagement with the host society is embraced with historically privileged position, the life-making practices enacted by Russian *relocants,* in turn also reproduce the such attitudes, leading to the impact being reinforced inequalities.

Russian *relocants* are mainly unaware of the position they hold in the host society and impact they bring. While mainly being confined within the "bubble" like spatial and social structures, often external anxieties only sporadically penetrate the group. The only thing that reaches the group is

aggressive resentment, that often is materialized in the urban fabric of Tbilisi. Such experiences arouse either reciprocal resentment or feelings of unfairness, which further limits the opportunities of unpacking what stands behind those.

Putting the Russian exodus, as a quasi-privileged migrant group, and Georgian host society, as a quasi-colony made it possible to provide a deeper understanding of the ongoing dynamics of unfolding the phenomenon. This theorization I argue holds the potential to contribute to the larger debates in a few regards: first, it is to be noted that the influx of Russian citizens since the War of Ukraine have been intensified not only in Georgia but rather in the larger region of mainly post-Soviet countries (Kazakhstan, Serbia, Armenia etc.), while the contexts may vary, considering the similar nature and potentially demographics of the emigres on the one hand and the like background of being the former Soviet country I believe would be a reasonable ground to construct potential theoretical framework where through the comparison, larger trends could be drawn.

Moreover, framing the Russian *relocant* life in Georgia as something that is shaped within Russia's imperial/colonial legacy context and in turn also reproduces new configurations of the same relations, hold the potential to enter two larger ongoing conversations: first, it might fruitfully engage with the debates on imperial/colonial nature of Russia and its impact on the countries affected; an second, to the privileged migration literature that increasingly becomes interested in exposing colonial continuities in elite mobility flows.

Bibliography

Aitieva, D., Kim, S., & Kudaibergenov, M. (2024). Russian'relocants' share their experiences: A study of perceptions of Kyrgyzstan as a destination. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *10*, 100930.

Amiryan, T. " Relocating" the Russian Cultural Scene: The Case of Russian Migrants in the South Caucasus (Armenia and Georgia).

Baycan-Levent, T., & Nijkamp, P. (2009). Characteristics of migrant entrepreneurship in Europe. *Entrepreneurship and regional development*, *21*(4), 375-397.

Benson, M., & O'reilly, K. (2009). Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration. *The sociological review*, *57*(4), 608-625.

Benson, M., & O'Reilly, K. (2018). *Lifestyle migration and colonial traces in Malaysia and Panama*. Springer.

Benson, M., & Osbaldiston, N. (Eds.). (2014). *Understanding lifestyle migration: Theoretical approaches to migration and the quest for a better way of life*. Springer.

Chigaleichik, K. (2023) “Russian Immigrants to the South Caucasus: Runaways, Enthusiasts and Ping Pong Balls.” *CRS: The Center for Russian Studies.* https://www.crs.ge/en/ned-essey - collections/russian-immigrants-to-the-south-caucasus%3A-runaways%2C-enthusiasts-and -ping-pong-balls/2.

Croucher, S. (2012). Privileged mobility in an age of globality. *Societies*, *2*(1), 1-13.

De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Duplan, K., & Cranston, S. (2023). Towards geographies of privileged migration: An intersectional perspective. *Progress in Human Geography*, *47*(2), 333-347.

Edwards, C. (2023). “Get out”: Influx of Russians to Georgia stokes old enimities, CNN, 26 May, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/26/europe/russian-influx-georgia-tensions-protests-intl/index.html

Fechter, A. M., & Walsh, K. (2012). The new expatriates. *Postcolonial approaches to mobile professionals. London*.

Fechter, A. M., & Walsh, K. (2013). Examining ‘Expatriate'Continuities: Postcolonial Approaches to Mobile Professionals. In *The New Expatriates* (pp. 9-22). Routledge.

Gavrilova, S. (2024). Autoethnographic Reflections on One's Own Imperialism. *Issue 03. Decolonizing the Self: How Do We Perceive Others When We Practice Autotheory?*.

Geiger, M., & Syrakvash, V. (2023). Georgia as Transient Space and Talent Harbor for Russian and Belarusian IT Specialists. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *24*(Suppl 5), 957-978.

Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023 საერთაშორისო გამჭვირვალობა - საქართველო. Available at: https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgiaseconomic-dependence-russia-summary-2023 (Accessed: 2 April, 2024)

Gorgadze, K. (2023) Have Caucasians Even been White? Russian Colonialism and The Machinery of Racialization, *The Funambulist,* Vol. 48: Fifty shades of White(ness), 24-31

Greene, P., & Owen, M. M. (2004). Race and ethnicity. *Handbook of entrepreneurial dynamics: The process of business creation*, 26-38.

Hirsch, F. (2005). *Empire of nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*. Cornell University Press.

Jones, S. (2003). The role of cultural paradigms in Georgian foreign policy. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, *19*(3), 83-110.

Kakachia, K., & Kandelaki, S. (2022). The Russian Migration to Georgia–Threats or Opportunities. *Ponars Eurasia*.

Kakachia, K., & Minesashvili, S. (2015). Identity politics: Exploring Georgian foreign policy behavior. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *6*(2), 171-180.

Kakachia, K., & Minesashvili, S. (2015). Identity politics: Exploring Georgian foreign policy behavior. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *6*(2), 171-180.

Kamalov, E. A., Sergeeva, I., Zavadskaya, M., & Kostenko, V. (2023). Studying Public Opinion Among Migrants: Challenges and Opportunities. *Russian Analytical Digest*, (292), 18-21.

Kamalov, E., KOSTENKO, V., Sergeeva, I., & Zavadskaya, M. (2023). New Russian migrants against the war: political action in Russia and abroad.

Kamalov, E., Sergeeva, I., Zavadskaya, M., & Kostenko, V. (2023). *Six months in exile: A new life of russian emigrants*. European University Institute.

Kolstø, P., & Rusetskii, A. (2012). Power differentials and identity formation: Images of self and other on the Russian–Georgian boundary. *National Identities*, *14*(2), 139-155.

Koplatadze, T. (2019). Theorising Russian postcolonial studies. *Postcolonial Studies*, *22*(4), 469-489.

Korableva, E. (2023). Migrants from Russia in Georgia during the War in Ukraine: Political Performance and the" Unpredictable Border". *Russian Analytical Digest*, (301), 2-7.

Korpela, M. (2013). A postcolonial imagination? Westerners searching for authenticity in India. In *The New Expatriates* (pp. 111-127). Routledge.

Krawatzek, F. (2023). Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the war in Ukraine.

Kucera, J. (2023) "Ruzzki not welcome": the Russian exiles getting a hostile reception in Georgia, Gurdian, 8 August, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/08/ruzzki-not-welcome-the-russian-exiles-getting-a-hostile-reception-in-georgia

Kuleshova, A., Chigaleichik, E., Podolsky, V., & Baranova, V. (2023). Russian migration to Armenia and Georgia in 2022: Enclave Economy and Local Employment. *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation.*

Kunz, S. (2016). Privileged mobilities: Locating the expatriate in migration scholarship. *Geography Compass*, 10(3), 89-101.

Layton, S. (1992). Eros and empire in Russian literature about Georgia. *Slavic Review*, *51*(2), 195-213.

Leggett, W. H. (2013). Institutionalising the colonial imagination: Chinese middlemen and the transnational corporate office in Jakarta, Indonesia. In *The New Expatriates* (pp. 77-90). Routledge.

Leonard, P. (2016). Expatriate identities in postcolonial organizations: working whiteness. Routledge

Lomsadze, G. (2023) The secret life of Russians in Georgia, Eurasianet, 21 June, https://eurasianet.org/the-secret-life-of-russians-in-georgia-0

Ma, Z., Zhao, S., Wang, T., & Lee, Y. (2013). An overview of contemporary ethnic entrepreneurship studies: themes and relationships. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 19(1), 32-52.

Maisuradze, R. (2023) 'Tbilisi Residential Market'

Makarychev, A. (2022) GEORGIA IN RUSSIAN DISCOURSES: FOCAL POINTS. *GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: The role of discourses and narratives*.

Margolis, E. (2023). "Consonants against those who disagree are the essence of any dictatorship." Explanatory dictionary of anti-war Russian. Schwingen.net [online]. Available from: https://schwingen.net/ekaterina-margolis-soglasnye-protiv-glasnyh-sut-ljuboj-diktatury/

Morrison, A. (2012). Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, *13*(2), 327-364.

Mühlfried, F. (2023). Between hospitality and hostility: Russian citizens in Georgia. *Anthropology Today*, *39*(3), 17-20.

National Statistics Office of Georgia. (2023). Statistical yearbook of Georgia 2023. Retrieved from https://www.geostat.ge/media/59491/Yearbook_2023.pdf

Parulava, D. (2022) Georgians bristle at the Russian influx: People still carry bitter memories of Putin's invasion in 2008, Politico, 19 October, https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-not-happy-tension-with-russian-influxukraine-war/

Pécoud, A. (2010). What is ethnic in an ethnic economy?. *International Review of Sociology*, 20(1), 59-76.

Portes, A., & Manning, R. D. (2005). The immigrant enclave: Theory and empirical examples. *The urban sociology reader*, 38, 583-594.

Purgina, E., & Menshikov, A. (2023) DIGITAL NARRATIVES OF THE NEW RUSSIAN EMIGRANTS: IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS ACROSS BORDERS AND BORDERLINES.

Reznikov, K. (2008). Does Georgia belong to Europe? Are the Georgians Europeans? 20 October. Retrieved from http://www.polemics. ru/articles/

Sahadeo, J. (2012). Soviet "Blacks" and place making in Leningrad and Moscow. *Slavic Review*, *71*(2), 331-358.

Sergeeva, I., & Kamalov, E. (2024). A year and a half in exile: progress and obstacles in the integration of Russian migrants. European University Institute.

Seskuria, N. (2023). An Impact of the Influx of Russians in Georgia. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, (135), 8-12.

Shirmanova, I. (2023) 800 tysiach rossiian mogli pokinut' stranu v 2022 godu. Esli byt' tochnym, February 27. https://tochno.st/materials/rossiyan-mogli-pokinut-stranu-v-2022-godu.

Spetschinsky, L., & Bolgova, I. V. (2014). Post-Soviet or post-colonial? The relations between Russia and Georgia after 1991. *European Review of International Studies*, *1*(3), 110-122.

Staske, S., and Giucci, E. (2023). Relocation of People from Russia and Belarus to Georgia: Results of 2nd Survey and Update of Economic Implications." Policy Study. German Economic Team https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/publication/relocation-of-people-from-russiaand-belarus-to-georgia-results-of-2nd-survey-and-update-of-economic-implications/.

Suny, R. G. (1994). *The making of the Georgian nation*. Indiana University Press.

Tlostanova, M. (2017). On decolonizing design. *Design Philosophy Papers*, *15*(1), 51-61.

Torkington, K., & Ribeiro, F. P. (2019). 'What are these people: migrants, immigrants, refugees?': Migration-related terminology and representations in Portuguese digital press headlines. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *27*, 22-31.

Tysiachniouk, M., & Konnov, A. (2022). Relocation from Russia to Georgia: Environmentalists in Exile. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 2022(288), 12-18.

Ukraine refugee crisis: Aid, Statistics and News: USA FOR UNHCR. USA for UNHCR. The Un Refugee Agency. (n.d.). https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/

van Dongen, E. (2019). Localizing ethnic entrepreneurship:“Chinese” chips shops in Belgium,“traditional” food culture, and transnational migration in Europe. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(15), 2566-2584.

Van Gorp, B. (2005). Where is the frame? Victims and intruders in the Belgian press coverage of the asylum issue. *European journal of communication*, *20*(4), 484-507.

Volery, T. (2007). Ethnic entrepreneurship: a theoretical framework. Handbook of research on ethnic minority entrepreneurship, 1, 30-41.

Waldinger, R. (1990). Race and ethnicity. Setting municipal priorities, 70-71.

World Bank. (n.d.). Ease of doing business index. Retrieved May 23, 2024, from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IC.BUS.EASE.XQ

Zhou, M. (2004). Revisiting ethnic entrepreneurship: Convergencies, controversies, and conceptual advancements 1. International migration review, 38(3), 1040-1074.

Zhou, M., & Liu, H. (2014). Transnational entrepreneurship and immigrant integration: New Chinese immigrants in Singapore and the United States. In Immigration and work (pp. 169-201). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.