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## New Russian Migrants in Armenia and Georgia: Challenges and Opportunities

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### Abstract

*The Russo-Ukrainian military conflict has forced many people in both countries to leave their homes. Based on original data sets collected in the capitals of Armenia and Georgia in November and December 2023, including in-depth interviews with migrants and domestic experts as well as participant observation, this paper focuses on the recent migration wave from Russia. New Russian migrants—often referred to as *relokanty* in Russian, from the English word “relocation”—represent a heterogeneous group. Six motivational types have been identified, having different motives for leaving and conditions for returning. Many have non-political reasons for migrating. In addition to migration as an act of protest, in fear of repression, or as an escape from mobilization, there is migration for the continuation of a career, for long-term travel, and to join a family member. The factors that enrich and challenge the social, cultural, and economic lives of this new wave of Russian migrants in both host countries are analyzed and discussed.*

**Keywords:** migration, *relokanty*, Russia, the Russo-Ukrainian military conflict, Armenia, Georgia

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## Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian military conflict triggered a huge wave of migration, particularly with many Ukrainian citizens fleeing the destructive consequences of the invasion [Andrews et al. 2023; Herbst, Sitek 2023; Mikheieva, Jaroszewicz 2023; Moise et al. 2023; Sereda 2023; van Tubergen et al. 2024; Woltran et al. 2025]. However, the flow of migration out of Russia has also become significant—many Russians have asked themselves whether they should leave or stay [Borussyak 2019]. The new Russian migrants, who have decided, in Hirschman’s [1970] terms, to “exit,” are often referred to as *relokanty* (from the English word “relocation”).<sup>1</sup> This is a heterogeneous group of individuals who left Russia for various reasons and with different probabilities of returning [Petersen 2022; Korobkov et al. 2022; Zavadskaya, Turchenko 2024; Sergeeva, Kamalov 2025].<sup>2</sup> *Relokanty* may travel the world or choose a new place of residence based on their social networks [Blumenstock et al. 2023; Massey et al. 1993] and/or other criteria such as the labor market and migration laws. *Relokanty* as a group includes more than just the “March migrants” (*martyata*) and “September migrants” (*sentiyabryata*)—the former having left the country just after the full-scale military actions (24 February 2022) and the latter at the beginning of the partial mobilization (21 September 2022). They are also not just the “Russian opposition in exile” [Krawatzek, Sasse 2024]. As migrants, they enrich and challenge their new host countries [Atanesyan 2023; Atanesyan, Mkrtichyan 2022; Atanesyan, Mkrtichyan 2023; Lomakin 2024].

*Relokanty* are actively studied, including by *relokanty* themselves, in the academic community. However, a study based on the results of this project conflated *relokanty* with political migrants [Sergeeva, Kamalov 2025]. The authors label all respondents of an online survey as political migrants, thus analyzing them as a homogeneous group.

Our study shows that this is not the case. The degree of politicization of *relokanty* varies significantly, as do the motives for migration and the conditions of return. We believe it is fundamentally important to avoid the unjustified politicization of relocation motives.

*Relokanty* is an umbrella term that encompasses various groups of migrants, differing both in their motives for leaving the country and their strategies for doing so. In other words, they are “a heterogeneous group that has left the country for a variety of reasons” [Petersen 2022, p. 112]. When discussing the damage Russia has suffered due to the relocation of part of its working-age population, it is important not so much to assess the scale of the phenomenon as to understand the motives of those leaving. The likelihood of return depends, among other things, on the original motive for relocation.

This article highlights the motives behind the “new migration” of Russians, which is necessary to form a clear view on the possibility of their return.

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the military conflict, on February 26, 2022, a guide to relocating from Russia was created: “Where to leave Russia for the free world?” At the same time, a new term was introduced: “relokant”. The site is no longer available: <https://relocation.guide/>

<sup>2</sup> See also additional work within the project [www.OutRush.io/eng](http://www.OutRush.io/eng) or the many publications referring to the dataset by Regina Smyth, Margarita Zavadskaya (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia), Andrei Semenov, Emil Kamalov, Veronica Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva, and Mikhail Turchenko (2024): “Building Commons in the Post-2022 Russian Diaspora” [Data set]. Indiana University, among others.

Those leaving are the result of the country's decades-long investment (in education, healthcare, and other infrastructure). Their departure depletes human capital, directly impacting the country's economic potential and competitiveness. The relocated population is primarily made up of members of "the creative class" and professionals who had long been loyal to the government in exchange for economic opportunities, personal freedom, and openness to the world. The conflict and the changes that followed (border closures, mobilization, ideological pressure) broke this contract. Accordingly, the government faces the challenge of developing a new social contract. To clarify this, it is necessary to review the motives for the departure and the conditions of return of *relokanty*.

In our study, we utilize qualitative research techniques, limiting ourselves to two countries—Armenia and Georgia—as significant enclaves of *relokanty* [Florinskaya, Mkrtchyan 2025]. So far, no reliable data exists on which countries are currently hosting the most Russian individuals. We chose these countries for two main reasons: we had access to them, and we assumed that their political and economic connections with Russia, ranging from relatively friendly (Armenia) to antagonistic (Georgia) at the time of our research, could influence the decisions of new migrants to leave or stay. Both countries are easy to reach for potential *relokanty*: Georgia has a land border with Russia, while Armenia has regular air services and allows entry with just a domestic Russian passport.

We conducted in-depth interviews with *relokanty* and domestic experts and conducted participant observation in Yerevan and Tbilisi (the capitals of Armenia and Georgia, respectively) in November and December 2023. An important feature of qualitative research is the fundamental impossibility of judging the degree of prevalence of a phenomenon in terms of the quantitative content of the identified groups. Interviews, however, provide deeper insights and allow us to understand the motivational attitudes of *relokanty*, their reasons for leaving, their actions, and plans for the future. With our paper, we contribute to the growing literature on migration in general and studies on new Russian migrants in particular [Baranova 2023; Baranova, Podolsky 2023; Chernysheva 2023; Figari Barberis, Zanatta 2023; Petrov 2024; Rapport 2023; Sitchinava 2025].

Armenia and Georgia are not typical host countries with adequate and developed infrastructure for migrants. Instead, they are two relatively small countries in the South Caucasus whose populations are mostly native. At the beginning of 2022, 3 million people lived in Armenia and 3.7 million in Georgia (excluding South Ossetia and Abkhazia); of those people, 98% were Armenians and 87% were Georgians, respectively. In 1991, at the time of independence, Armenia's population was more than 3.5 million and Georgia's was about 5.5 million. Population decline—about 17% in Armenia and around 32% in Georgia—has often been linked to socio-economic problems in each country. The stable negative net migration rate was only interrupted in 2020, when migration outflows were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to official data, 65,149 Russians arrived in Armenia in 2022 [Melkumyan, Melkonyan 2025]. Many Russians then returned home or moved to other countries. In 2022, 8,660 Russian citizens received official residency status (for comparison, only 1,487 people received this status in 2021). According to official data, while about 870,000 Russians entered Georgia in 2022, 810,000 Russians left; this means that about 60,000 Russians stayed in Georgia in 2022, the highest positive migration in the last decade. However, there was an outflow of Russians in 2023; according to the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 30,000 more Russians left Georgia than arrived. This means

that about half of the migrants had left the country. Some moved to other countries, and some returned to Russia. These data should be treated with caution, however. Armenia and Georgia are both visa-free for Russian citizens—no official registration was required for up to 365 days (Georgia) and 180 days (Armenia). Many people may not be included in the official statistics.

Armenia and Georgia have many commonalities with each other and with Russia: the Soviet legacy, the difficulties of the 1990s, and the large diaspora from both South Caucasus countries in Russia. However, there are a large number of differences in the relationships between Russia and each country, for instance, the close economic and political ties with Armenia vs. trade wars with Georgia. The most striking difference is in military experience: Russian participation in 2008 (Georgia) vs. Russian non-participation in 2023 (Armenia). The Russo-Georgian military conflict in 2008, followed by the recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by Russia [Asmus 2010; Cornell, Nilsson 2009; Cornell, Starr 2009], and the continuation of “the borderization process—a unilateral border demarcation process alongside the administrative boundary lines between Georgia and its two breakaway regions” [Kakachia, Lebanidze 2024, p. 7; Kakachia et al. 2017], remains a trauma for Georgia. In Georgia, you can see T-shirts with the inscription “20% of the country is occupied by Russia”. The emerging trauma for Armenia is the loss of the Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijan in 2023. From the Armenian perspective, the Russian government was too weak and/or unwilling to intervene in support of Armenia. Russia’s lack of support led Armenia to refuse financing for the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) in 2024 because it considered it a “bubble alliance.” Additionally, Armenia has taken in about 115,000 refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a challenge for the small country (Table 1).

**Table 1. The difference in relations between Armenia and Georgia with Russia**

	Armenia	Georgia
Political partnership	Warm and friendly relations with Russia (Customs Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization, many other agreements)	Diplomatic relations have been suspended. Georgia’s national security concept designates Russia as “enemy number one”.
Trade partnership	Russia is the main trading partner. In 2022, Russia accounted for 45% of Armenia’s exports and 29.9% of its imports	No trade relations for a long period of time In 2022, Russia accounted for 11.7% of Georgia’s exports and 13.6% of its imports.
Military conflicts affecting relations with Russia	Nagorno-Karabakh On 19–20 September 2023, Nagorno-Karabakh came under full control of Azerbaijan	Abkhazia and South Ossetia 26 August 2008: recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by Russia

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we describe our research design (section 2). We then present several groups of *relokanty* (section 3), discuss their impact on the host countries (section 4), and conclude (section 5).

## Research design

Qualitative research design is especially appropriate when the subject matter is new, not well understood, or sensitive to some extent. Qualitative research techniques allow researchers to go deep; bring out important details, nuances, narratives, and patterns; and help explain complex phenomena [Flick 2025]. Qualitative research tools have some limitations, for example, they cannot quantify data outcomes. We travelled to Armenia and Georgia to conduct our research in November and December 2023. We recruited our respondents before our fieldwork by using the snowball method with multiple entry points to avoid getting into one cluster of similar stories [Schwartz-Shea 2015]. We wrote emails to our potential respondents in advance and asked for either the possibility of meeting or help in finding potential interview partners. Once in the field, we asked our interviewees for new potential contacts and used every chance encounter we had, for example, making small talk with a waiter in Yerevan resulted in us interviewing him.

We chose semi-structured in-depth interviews. The atmosphere of an in-depth interview, which is similar to yet distinct from everyday conversation, allows the researcher to collect insights and perspectives revealed by the respondent unconsciously [Flick 2022; Johnson 2002; Silverman 2022]. The technique of semi-structured interviews allows for the possibility of changing the order of questions and omitting some questions because of their irrelevance to the situation. For our interviews, we did not read out the questions but rather created an authentic conversation, in which the respondents themselves determined which topics they would like to dwell on and discuss in more detail [Kruse 2014].

We organized all our interviews according to the following procedure: we offered our respondents their choice of time and place for the interview. Being able to choose the time ruled out the possibility that the respondent would cut the interview short on account of being busy. Being able to choose the location also provided important information. The fact that the respondent was able to invite us to their place of work or knew a local café where to meet indicated that the respondent was embedded in the local community. If the respondent chose a café, this indirectly indicated that they had the resources to eat out and that eating out was a part of their leisure time. When the respondent was able to choose a café that was convenient for the meeting, that also indicated that they were aware enough of the cafes to be able to make a good choice of location.

Meeting in an office indicated that work was available, and the conversation began with a discussion of what kind of work the respondent did. *Relokanty* who had just arrived and/or were still poorly embedded in local life were usually unable to suggest a meeting place. They asked us to make a suggestion and were usually willing to come to our hotel. As a result, the interviews were conducted at three different locations: cafés, workplaces, and our hotel lobby.

The interview guide included the following blocks. After a short introduction, including our affiliations, the sponsor of our project, and a brief description of our research question, we asked questions about:

- their reasons for leaving Russia, the reactions of their community (family, friends, colleagues, etc.), their choice of destination;
- life in the new place, sources of income, job opportunities, social circles, leisure time;
- plans for the future, conditions for returning to Russia.

Table 2. Interview analysis: quotes, codes, categories\*

Category: PROFESSIONAL MOTIVATION FOR MIGRATION	
Quote:	Code:
«Stay? Thinking solely in terms of the domestic market? After you've had the whole world in your head, it seems so petty.»	Market and professional opportunity contraction
«What were my options? Stay and look for a new job?»	Escape from unemployment
«Business trips, transfers, communication with colleagues from foreign offices... This was a natural part of my work. All of that, of course, has come to an end.»	Communication with international colleagues as a value
«Of course, I could have stayed and even found a decent job. But in a few years, my experience will only be relevant to Russia. I'll lose the chance to enter the international labor market if I want to.»	Loss of international expertise
«My employer is from Switzerland. How will I get paid if Russia is cut off from the global banking system?»	Technical difficulties with payroll
«I was panicking that the programs I was working on would be blocked. They were all licensed.»	Software restrictions
«With my work, there's nothing else to do in Russia. I studied same-sex marriage, the issue of gender reassignment... These things are now strictly taboo in Russia. You can't talk about them publicly. My publications have become worthless.»	Cancellation of a research topic
Category: MOTIVATION OF POLITICAL ACTIVISTS	
Quote:	Code:
«I'm wanted in Russia. Our organization has been declared extremist»	Escape from arrest
«I've been detained several times for participating in political protests. But each time I was released. And now, I think, I won't get off so easily. The vegetarian era is over. They're starting to tighten the screws»	The political situation is changing and repression is getting tougher
«I don't see any way to continue the struggle while in Russia. I could, of course, die in prison, like Navalny <sup>3</sup> . But the people wouldn't appreciate it. No one cares. Only from the outside.»	Migration as a condition for continuing the political struggle
«When there's a political crisis in Russia, people like us will become the new political elite, who have preserved their values in exile.»	Expectations and Prospects

\*All translations from the interviews were done by the authors.

Each block included dozens of questions, the order of which was determined by the course of the conversation. In addition to *relokanty*, we also conducted several expert interviews with domestic scholars and practitioners to capture the mood of the host country. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Russian, the native, second, or heritage language(s) of both the interviewers and interviewees, with only two interviews conducted in English, a foreign language to all the speakers. We do not expect that any language-based issues had a significant impact on the study outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> Alexey Navalny is included in the list of terrorists and extremists in Russia.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 135 minutes. Interviews were either recorded, or one of us took notes during the interview. Confidentiality was granted to all the interviewees. We interviewed 15 *relokanty* and 5 experts in Yerevan and 17 *relokanty* and 3 experts in Tbilisi. This allowed us to reach saturation (see the discussions on sample size in qualitative research by [Blaikie 2018; Dworkin 2012; Sim et al. 2018]).

Here we give an example of how we analyzed the interviews. Based on the quotes, codes were identified, which in turn formed a category (Table 2).

Our short stays in both capitals allowed us to practice open participant observation [Lamnek 2005]. We witnessed the places our respondents lived and worked; the challenges they face, such as power outages, interruptions to hot water and water in general, traffic jams; as well as the positive elements, such as the hospitality and readiness of locals to support strangers. We kept a research diary. On returning, we transcribed the interviews, analyzed the transcriptions together with protocols using axial coding, by clustering thematic blocks and searched for meaningful categories within these blocks, for example, disagreement with the invasion policy, flight from mobilization, fear of the new Iron Curtain, etc. We supplemented our analysis with our notes from the research diary and the literature. The preliminary study outcomes were presented at four academic events with international and interdisciplinary audiences (*communicative validation*).

## Empirical Results

Analyzing our data, we were able to cluster *relokanty* into six different groups according to their migration alternatives, urgency of departure, conditions of return, and the *relokanty* leitmotif: those who left Russia

- (1) for ideological reasons;
- (2) for political reasons;
- (3) for business reasons;
- (4) to avoid mobilization or the draft;
- (5) as travelers; and
- (6) as accompanying persons.

### 1. Ideological *relokanty*

The motives behind the migration of ideological *relokanty* stem from a fundamental disagreement with the domestic and foreign policy of the Russian government. These migrants are categorically opposed to the full-scale military conflict and call it “war,” which contradicts the Kremlin’s official terminology (“special military operation”). The group’s decision to leave is based on strong moral positions and values. As a rule, even before their departure, they tended to be explicit or latent critics of the political course of the current Russian administration and showed a strong desire to leave the country. The answer to the question “*Why did you leave Russia?*” was quickly

and simply formulated in terms of rejection of the war and placing the entire responsibility on Russia. Even if their decision to migrate was made quickly and without hesitation, ideological *relokanty* did not feel the need to leave urgently. They could systematically prepare their move, choose a country, resolve their issues with real estate and other property (if any) in Russia, and prepare a package of documents to legalize their status in their new place of residence. But impulsive actions were also possible, as with one respondent, who declared, *“I left everything and went because I could not stay in the aggressor country.”* This position is more characteristic of single young people; having a family implies more responsibility, which prevents impulsive actions. But no matter how long their preparations, ideological *relokanty* unambiguously point to the end of February 2022 as the moment they made their decision.

This group includes people who are often well educated and financially stable, among whom the idea of political freedom and a Western-style way of life is especially widespread. They characterized the atmosphere in Russia as *“stuff”* and *“uncomfortable.”* Accordingly, ideological *relokanty* were motivated not so much to wait out the period of hostilities as to build a new life in a more acceptable environment—that is, they took their emigration seriously and intended to integrate into their host country for a significant amount of time. They made a pragmatic choice of country with many factors in mind. For the ideologically minded, there was a significant difference between Yerevan and Tbilisi. In Tbilisi, we saw anti-Russian graffiti almost everywhere in the city—on the walls of houses, on gates, and in underground passages—often with profanity and offensive language. There was nothing comparable in Yerevan in terms of the scale of politicized street graffiti.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the ideological *relokanty* received confirmation of the correctness of their choice while walking around Tbilisi. In Yerevan, on the contrary, they were perplexed by the neutrality of the visual appearance of the streets.

A characteristic case was a young woman from Moscow, a representative of the creative class: *“From the first day of the war, I knew I would not stay. My family can be called oppositional. But my parents can’t leave, my father has a business.”* She was from a wealthy family (she had travelled extensively with her parents to Europe and graduated from one of the country’s most prestigious universities) and had chosen Tbilisi as a transit zone. She has no plans to settle in Georgia permanently or for very long: *“I like the spirit of Tbilisi, perhaps I would have stayed here, but Georgians make it very difficult to get a residence permit. And it is impossible to get citizenship at all. Georgia is a poor country, there is a high level of unemployment. And they don’t have what we call compulsory medical insurance [...] I will probably move to Europe.”* She believed that it would be difficult for her to find fulfillment professionally in Russia due to the reduction of creative freedoms, i.e., her political motive had merged with the pragmatic. Her speech was full of rhetoric denouncing the current government and engaging in political discourse: *“They [the Russian authorities] have stolen everything that was dear to me. They spoiled everything that was dear to me.”* She claimed those people who had stayed in Russia had a *“thick skin”* and *“no conscience”*. However, she occasionally went to Moscow: to finish her studies, to visit her parents, and to receive medical treatment when necessary. There were no moral dilemmas or obstacles to that.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of our visit, there were no flags or slogans in support of Ukraine in Yerevan. Our domestic experts confirmed our observations and cited two reasons for this: Armenia has its own war around Nagorno-Karabakh [Miarka 2023] and President Zelensky’s demonstrative support for Azerbaijan’s position on Karabakh in 2020. Flags and slogans in support of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh were visible throughout the urban landscape.

## 2. Political Activists

The military action forced the authorities to tighten their control over the opposition within the country. The authorities made it clear that times have changed: what was permissible before will now be severely punished. Those taking part in political activism against the regime could not fail to realize this. This group is extremely heterogeneous with regards to how dramatic their departures were and the degree to which they were forced to leave.

The difference stems from the fact that “ideological *relokanty*” could remain; their departure was entirely voluntary. Their liberal views led to tension and the rejection of the ongoing changes, but they experienced no infringement of their rights, much less any risks to their lives. In other words, they spent years in a state of “internal exile”, which gradually evolved into actual migration. Political activists, in contrast, took action and fought. As the situation changed, the government’s reaction to these actions became harsher. They believed that migration was forced, to avoid repression.

At one extreme are those who fled the country to escape prosecution. Some were on the state wanted list with no chance to return under the current government; some tried to change their status through official channels; and some have just distanced themselves from politics in their new place of residence, instead creating startups, studying for new professions, receiving new degrees, or establishing temporary academic affiliations with new schools. Despite their different situations, they were united by the conviction that it was dangerous for them to remain in Russia and they bought one-way tickets. They justified their decision to leave by talking about the dangers they faced.

At the other end of the spectrum were employees of organizations considered undesirable or foreign agents in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Some of these organizations offered their employees collective relocation, offering them financial and organizational help when they left the country. The collective relocation of these organizations was the easiest relocation option, as their employees were able to keep their jobs and income.

The choice between Armenia and Georgia was not difficult for political activists. Georgia has no diplomatic relations with Russia and, accordingly, no extradition agreement with Russia. Those wanted by Russia, or with pending criminal cases, overwhelmingly preferred Georgia. This does not mean that no political activists have fled to Armenia, just that the bulk are concentrated in Georgia.

One young man, who was wanted in Russia as a member of an extremist organization, left for Tbilisi. He was a member of a youth movement of a political party (not parliamentary but quite well-known) but the party bosses had expelled the youth for excessive maximalism. Left without party control, the young people began to act in more desperate and risky ways. He told us: “*We organized a performance—a ritual burial of a Donetsk soldier in a shoe box. We organized an alternative “Immortal Regiment”<sup>6</sup>—we carried posters of bombed Ukrainian cities.*” Because of these performances,

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<sup>5</sup> “Undesirable organizations” have several significant restrictions on operating in Russia (Federal Law of 23 May 2015 N 129-FZ, “On amendments to some legislative acts of the Russian Federation”); foreign agents also have many significant restrictions (Federal Law of 21 December 2012 N 121-FZ, “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organizations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents”).

<sup>6</sup> The Immortal Regiment is an event held every 9 May to celebrate Victory Day in Russia and abroad. Citizens carry portraits of their family members who participated in the Second World War.

they were summoned for questioning by the police: *“When I came out after the first interrogation, I immediately called Foundation X.<sup>7</sup> I was offered a choice: either they pay for my lawyer or a ticket to Georgia. I chose the second. They chose Georgia, because Russia has no diplomatic relations with Georgia.”* Since then, he has not been back to Russia. He has not taken any final exams; he has not completed his secondary school education: *“My mum got hives from nerves. But now everything is fine, she went with my sister to live in Poland, she works in a factory [in Russia she used to be a theatre director], there is not much money.”* At the time of the interview, he was suffering from depression and dreamed of going to a European or American university. For this, he needed to learn English: *“I’m learning through free programs.”* He has never travelled to Armenia: *“It is not safe in Armenia. I have a charge of ‘rehabilitation of Nazism’ [against me], and Armenian law also has such an article. Yerevan can extradite people at Russia’s request, while here they cannot. Yerevan is more pro-Russian. All pro-Ukrainian actions were harshly stopped there.”*

Another young man was a member of a group known for its scandalous performances against the Russian Orthodox Church. He assessed the risks and decided to leave Russia. He chose Georgia because, with its explicit rhetoric in support of joining the EU, it is sympathetic to the general vector of development, while Armenia, with its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), seemed too *“pro-Russian”*. According to him: *“I like where things are going here, 80% of Georgians want to join the EU. Tomorrow there will be a demonstration,<sup>8</sup> they will carry the biggest EU flag. The stars for it were sewn in different regions, then sewn together. It’s so symbolic.”* However, the Georgian authorities do not want to turn the country into a hub for the Russian opposition. This may be because they fear the *relokanty* will join the ranks of the Georgian opposition and/or because they do not want to irritate Moscow. Either way, despite all the anti-Russian rhetoric, the Georgian authorities are obstructing the immigration of politically active *relokanty* from Russia.<sup>9</sup> In his interview, the young man said, *“My legal stay expired a long time ago, I can’t do a visa run<sup>10</sup>, so I don’t risk it. A lot of people are not allowed back in. So, I don’t go on vacation or to conferences. I have a dog. Who will she stay with if they won’t let me back in?”*

### 3. Russian Expats

Changes in the economy, particularly in the banking sector, have meant that some professionals have found it impossible to continue their work in Russia. In addition, many Western companies have announced their departure from the country, with some employees being offered the chance to work in subsidiaries outside of Russia, forcing

<sup>7</sup> A famous NGO supporting democracy in Russia, an “undesirable organization”.

<sup>8</sup> The respondent is referring to a demonstration held on 9 December 2023.

<sup>9</sup> *Relokanty* create similar problems in Kyrgyzstan, where the local authorities have shut down political protest to avoid a quarrel with Russia. In particular, the police there have arrested Russians displaying Ukrainian flags [Khoperskaya 2023].

<sup>10</sup> Many foreigners do not need a visa to enter Armenia and Georgia, only a valid passport. By entering the country, they receive a stamp; within 365 days they have to leave the country for at least a day and then they are allowed to come back for another 365 days. This practice is usually referred to as a “visa run.”

employees to choose between moving and losing their jobs. Given that salaries tend to be quite high in large global companies, many employees have accepted these offers, regardless of their political views.

In the same group are those who worked remotely for a foreign employer and were paid in a foreign bank account. With the outbreak of hostilities, currency transfers to Russia became difficult. According to one young woman:

*I alone feed two children. I have a sole proprietorship, my customer is a Swiss firm, in fact I have been working for them for several years. As soon as all this started, the question immediately arose: how will I get my salary? What will I do if I [foreign] software is blocked? After a couple of weeks, I left for Yerevan.*

This group of *relokanty* is easily identified as young men and women with laptops occupying tables in cafes with wifi [Denisova-Schmidt 2025]. For the local population, the terms *relokant* and *IT guy* have become synonyms. This is due in part to the fact that relocated professionals have money, so they are visible as consumers. As a resident of Yerevan observed: “Relokanty live a wonderful life here. In all the central streets, all the cafes—they are there. When you go to the swimming pool in summer, they are there. And a season ticket costs a lot of money. Who rents apartments in the center? Russian IT guys again.”

A Tbilisi resident had a similar impression: “I have seen a lot of Russians in pubs and restaurants in popular, comfortable districts.” These *relokanty* are more visible than other groups such as those who escaped mobilization and live in private houses on the outskirts of Yerevan and work as pizza deliverers.

Host countries can greatly benefit from the influx of this group, something the Armenian government understands very well. Preferential registration and taxation conditions have been created for IT specialists. A year and a half after February 24, 2022, changes in Armenia’s digital environment have become visible. According to one male respondent: “When I arrived in Yerevan in May 2022, it was certainly tough. No grocery delivery at all, no normal banking apps. Everything was a bit prehistoric, impossible to understand [...] Now there are quite decent services; not at Moscow level, but a huge step forward.”

Another of our respondents, a social scientist, left because he was afraid his academic topic would make him appear “like a traitor”. He said: “This is, if not a ban directly, a lack of professional perspective. Besides, I gave an interview where I said that many results of public opinion polls are of a closed nature.”

Among those whose relocation was related to their professional lives, many were in one way or another associated with LGBTQ+,<sup>11</sup> childfree, and other stigmatized groups in Russia, including doctors, lawyers, psychologists, and activists. Against the backdrop of the military conflict, the line on “traditional values” has intensified. The state has passed a law against LGBTQ+ propaganda and declared that being childfree is a dangerous ideology. Accordingly, those who worked with these groups felt anxious. Some have preferred to provide professional services remotely, outside Russia.

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<sup>11</sup> Organizations involved in LGBTQ+ issues are considered extremist organizations and are banned in Russia.

These professionals behave in an emphatically depoliticized manner, stressing that their motives for moving were purely professional and carefully avoiding politics in conversation. Characteristically, many avoided the word “war,” refusing even to use the official label “special military operation” and using instead the amorphous “it” (“when it started...,” “when it will end...,” “these events”). Nevertheless, they understood their privilege over other groups:

*So I was lucky in a way, my colleagues took care of many everyday matters, and we were paid for relocation. [...] So, of course, I was in a better position than many others. Well, plus I had a job, yes, I didn't have to look for it. Because, of course, many who came, left [Georgia] because they couldn't settle down. Life in Tbilisi is very expensive – very expensive, and food is expensive. In general, housing also went up in price, because everybody came. So, it was easier for us.*

#### 4. Fleeing mobilization

This group is represented by young men of conscription age<sup>12</sup> who did not want to serve in the army, as well as those who could receive notices as “reserve” military personnel as part of the mobilization.

This group has extremely diverse political views and did not leave until after the start of the partial mobilization. During the seven months prior, from February to September 2022, this group was not planning to leave; however, they left in a panic when the partial mobilization was announced by the Russian President. Even those who had been given state exemptions from army service felt they needed to get out of Russia.<sup>13</sup> One of the young men we interviewed said:

*Everyone ran, and I ran [...] I had a friend with absolutely pro-Putin views; he ran away when mobilization began. That is, he is the same patriot, only he doesn't want to fight. And while others were fighting, he supported it all.*

One case from Yerevan is illustrative. The NGO Kovcheg<sup>14</sup> regularly invited *relokanty* for integration seminars, in which they explained how to rent a house, open a bank account, find a job, and so on. These seminars were popular among the *relokanty*. However, when those fleeing mobilization arrived in Yerevan, things changed. The representatives of Kovcheg had always opened with a speech that marked them

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<sup>12</sup> Those who had already served in the army were the subject to the partial mobilization. Those called up for compulsory military service were promised they would not be sent to the front, but many young men did not believe it. Therefore, both those who had to go to the army due to their age and those who had already served and could be mobilized fled. Previously, young men in Russia were drafted at ages 18 to 27; after January 1, 2024, that changed to 18 to 30.

<sup>13</sup> In Armenia, for example, the case of an IT employee at Raiffeisenbank caused great concern (he was drafted despite his exemptions and died).

<sup>14</sup> *Kovcheg* is a non-profit organization created by one of the leaders of the Russian opposition, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is recognized as a foreign agent in Russia.

as an anti-war organization—this was now a problem for the *relokanty*. *Relokanty* started to leave the hall during this speech. They did not want to be associated with an organization that criticized Russia's foreign policy. They had come to sit out the military conflict, nothing more.

The migration of this group was an impulsive step, poorly prepared and planned. Accordingly, the young men who left did not have the time to solve property or financial issues or set up an agreement to work remotely with an employer. Their goal was to cross the border at any cost to avoid joining the army; other issues were put aside for later. Fleeing dictated this group's attitude toward migration as a temporary measure, and they were not concerned with learning the local language, searching for permanent jobs, purchasing real estate, or dealing with other questions migrants are often faced with. These are migrants who hope to return to Russia.

In Yerevan, we met some men from Moscow, and five of them were renting a house in the suburbs of Yerevan. They left in the first days of the mobilization. During the fourteen months they had lived in Yerevan, they had never travelled outside the city or attended a single cultural event. They told us the most memorable event of their Yerevan life was when the pipes burst and the house flooded. Luckily, they had bought shelves, so their electronics weren't ruined. When asked about dating, one of the men answered, *"I have contact with a woman once a month when I get my hair cut at the hairdresser's."* A previous roommate had returned to Moscow: *"Couldn't make it anymore. His girlfriend stayed there."* Characteristically, any political assessment of the situation was avoided during the interviews. The men chose their words carefully to avoid criticizing foreign or domestic politics. They remembered Moscow with nostalgia. *"I haven't rented my Moscow apartment all this time, it's so good that it's a shame to rent it. I invested all my money in it. But everything dragged on, I had to find a realtor"*, one young respondent said.

In Yerevan, a woman who had sheltered several friends fleeing mobilization said that one started drinking heavily (*"We didn't have time to take the bottles out"*), fell into depression, and eventually returned to Russia.

## 5. Travelers

Some *relokanty* admitted that the migration wave brought on by the Russo-Ukrainian military conflict had given them a new perspective on the possibility of traveling, changing countries, and their current living conditions. Migration has become a popular topic on social networks and in everyday conversation, calling into question the value of a stationary life and creating the desire to take part in new ways of living inherently linked to spatial mobility. We learned in interviews that some had begun to experience a fear of missing out on new experiences. When people have friends, neighbors, colleagues, and relatives who have decided to leave, the project of moving starts to seem more realistic, especially when there is someone they can turn to for advice and/or short-term accommodation.

Some representatives of this group recalled that they had *"wanted to live somewhere for a long time, to change their environment"* but could not make up their minds. In addition, some firms, adapting to the departure of their employees, had

to agree to remote work. Moreover, the experience of home-officing was familiar to many employees and employers from the COVID-19 pandemic. Travelers used the situation as an opportunity: *“Why not live in a warmer climate? I’ve thought about it before, but now it’s become, how can I make it happen.”*

Representatives of this group did not voice complaints about the current regime in Russia; instead, they were immersed in a new experience and possibly planting the seeds for their future life. Many had no answer to questions like: *“What’s next? What are your plans?”* This kind of migration was purely voluntary. While both travelers and ideological *relokanty*, who also left Russia voluntarily, miss Russia, travelers were less worried about when they might return. One young man, originally from Yekaterinburg, told us:

*Everyone is going, why don’t we go too? I can give you the example of a friend of mine who lived in Serbia for almost a year, and his political views are completely pro-Putin. He left because he is an IT guy and wanted to live abroad. Then he went back. People who are not seen in political activism still leave: it’s the herd feeling of “everyone ran and I ran.”*

Armenia and Georgia both offer a wealth of cultural opportunities, as well as a rich history to learn about and a pleasant climate to enjoy. A sentiment we heard repeatedly in Yerevan was: *“Moscow is a cool city but there is too much distance between [the things you want to do]. You don’t have to spend so much time in traffic jams [here] and you have more free time. Sometimes it even seems that there is more sunshine in the country here and it charges you with energy.”* Another respondent from Tbilisi passionately described his travels:

*I have traveled to all the regions of Georgia because I really wanted to, and there are regions here that you can get to only in the summertime; these are the highland regions. You can get there only by off-road vehicle, when the roads are not muddy. We went on a holiday—I probably won’t remember its Georgian name—but it was a custom there that people took black and red currants, fruits, and painted their faces. And at first, children in the village painted my face, but then it was even funnier. The driver who took us, he is a local, he came with his brother and friends. They saw us, they were madly happy, but they didn’t have these currants with them, they had Nutella with them, they smeared us with Nutella. It was very funny. And there were shepherds sitting there, they invited us to a supra (Georgian feast). We also talked to them. Well, it was great, I love to communicate with people in settlements, to listen to what they say, because it is an interesting contrast to Tbilisi, but all these meetings were very pleasant for me. I like very much what is happening in the regions of Georgia as well, it seems to me that this is a kind of federation; this country is very complex, there are regions that have their own languages, Mingrelian, Svan, for example, or just dialects. And not to mention that, of course, it has its own customs, culture, traditions, cuisine, of course; it is all very interesting for me, interesting to study.*

Domestic experts in Georgia highlighted the popularity of tourism among Russians: *“Russian people like Georgian nature and our culture, our food, and everything”.*

But there are not only pleasant experiences for locals. For example, three professional adult entertainers made a short pornographic film at Erebuni Historical-Archaeological Reserve-Museum in Yerevan, which caused an outrage in the city. The director of the open museum resigned.

## 6. *Accompanying persons*

The final group of *relokanty* are the family (spouses, children), friends, partners, etc. of those who left Russia for the reasons discussed above. One young woman in Yerevan told us: “*My husband often used to say: I will leave when they [the authorities] close [radio] Ekho Moskvyy.*<sup>15</sup> *On March 3 [2022], the radio was closed; on March 5, he left [...] I followed with the kids two weeks later.*”

This group fulfilled an important support function during the difficult period of adapting to a new place. During our fieldwork in Yerevan, we saw printed announcements offering psychological support and help with problems like alcoholism, clearly targeted at *relokanty*. One Armenian expert told us about a Russian businesswoman who had lived in Yerevan for a long time and would clean up empty beer bottles from the stairway in her apartment building. She was worried what others would think about *relokanty* from Russia. According to the expert, she worried about the image of Russia and that those who had recently relocated since the mobilization were a problem.

One respondent told us about a friend who had left Russia to avoid mobilization but eventually went back because his wife could not or would not follow him due to her career. Political activists or those fleeing the mobilization were afraid to return to Russia; they depended on friends and family to solve domestic and financial problems in their absence. One political activist in Yerevan told us: “*My wife came to Armenia for a while and then went [back] to Russia. From May 2022 to September 2023, she commuted between the countries. I decided not to show my face in Russia in any way, and she was traveling between countries and settled all the issues*”.

For single people, it was crucial to have a close circle of friends who could help in difficult situations. One respondent told us about a 20-year-old man in Tbilisi who had an autoimmune disease that he had not known about before and that was apparently difficult to diagnose:

*He suddenly stopped walking. We took him to the hospital—he had a course of [strong medication]. Now he is at home, he can walk, but it’s not clear yet how he’s going to feel after he’s off the medication [...] We raised money for his treatment, and it was very expensive, but we were helped by media campaigns that were able to spread the word that he was sick. We even considered the possibility of taking him to Russia, but not unless we could get him in a stable condition here. [...] He is on a wanted list and could be mobilized. We have had precedents where people with serious illnesses were taken away without being examined by the military enlistment office and sent to the front.*

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<sup>15</sup> *Ekho Moskvyy* (The Echo of Moscow) used to be a liberal radio station based in Moscow, broadcasting domestically and internationally from 1990 to 2022. It became famous for reporting on and condemning the 1991 Soviet coup attempt.

Many *relokanty* took their underage children with them. This created ongoing challenges such as how to continue their education, facing new social environments, and incomplete Russian language acquisition—the impact of these issues may appear in the future. Some children continued their secondary school education online in Russia while also being enrolled in international secondary schools. This meant the stress of studying in two different languages. Some children left Russia without taking final school exams such as the Basis State Exam (*OGE*) for vocational training, or the Unified State Exam (*EGE*) for entering higher education. One family told us: “*You had to go to Russia to take OGE. My daughter said she wasn’t ready [to go back to Russia]. Her education is incomplete now, [...] now she is continuing her studies at an international school online.*” Some children need psychological support to cope with their new reality. One relocated mother in Georgia told us: “*There was Tbilisi Pride in July [2023] that was disrupted by far-right organizations and some other conservatives. My daughter has a very keen sense of justice and was very sad and worried.*”

For an overview of the different types of *relokanty* and their motivations, see *Table 3*.

**Table 3. Types of *relokanty***

Types	The main reason for migration	Condition of return	Leitmotif in interview
Ideological	Disagreement with the government’s domestic and foreign policies	Change of political regime, cessation of hostilities, the return of liberal ideology	“No war”
Political activists	Repression, up to and including imprisonment	Change of political regime, cancellation of the threat of repression	Bringing down authoritarianism
Fleeing mobilization	The time to be mobilized into the army	End of mobilization, lack of finances and/or employment in the new place	Contract soldiers should fight
Russian expats	Employers leaving Russia, difficulties with banking and technology transactions	Return of Western firms to the Russian labor market, lifting of the block on bank transfers	Work first of all
Travelers	Experience of migration among friends, desire for new experiences, fear of border closures	Travel fatigue, employers’ demands to go back offline	See the world
Accompanying persons	Leaving of family and loved ones	Return of family and loved ones	Stay with family and loved ones

### *Mixed types and limitations*

It should be emphasized that someone's motives for relocating may change during their stay abroad. For example, some young men who initially fled the mobilization, hoping for quick returns, found good jobs, and appreciated the support given by the authorities to IT workers in Armenia. They now have a professional motivation to stay in their relocation country, regardless of the mobilization. Travel itself can also become a motivator. One of the young men we interviewed was unable to find a job and had to look for a country with a cheaper cost of living. First, he moved to Thailand, then to Vietnam, then to Laos, becoming an avid traveler throughout Southeast Asia. The end of mobilization no longer guarantees the return of those avoiding it, as the initial factors pushing *relokanty* out of Russia have become a variety of pull factors.

*Relokanty* are a very diverse group that cannot be fully captured from an outside perspective. As one respondent in Yerevan explained:

*The locals think the relokanty are throwing their money around. It's funny, you can see it in the chat rooms, some people call themselves expats. These are people who relocated with companies. These are the people with money and opportunity. If we refer to those whose lives have been threatened, we could call them refugees. These are political activists who came here with nothing but the clothes on their back and the impossibility of returning to Russia. They often don't have the opportunity to find work, because online they will definitely not work for Russian companies. They often work here in positions held by migrants in Russia. So it's a very diverse crowd.*

Our study has some limitations. It does not cover two important groups of *relokanty*, the first includes those who decided to move back to Russia. Our respondents mentioned some of these people and their reasons, including the lack of familial support and/or the weight of family responsibilities; the reduced fear of being recruited and sent to the front (one expert mentioned a young man from Siberia who had rushed to move to Armenia and then, after seeing the situation in his region, decided to return); the lack of previous comforts; disappointment in the weak infrastructure in both cities (many respondents mentioned the poor design of apartments available for rent, likening them to "grandmother's house," and significant problems with internet access, electricity, hot water, and heating). The second group we did not consider in our research includes Russians with Armenian or Georgian heritage who were born and/or grew up in Russia. Future research might consider their perspectives on the ongoing situation and how they are coping with their multiple identities.

### **New migrants and their impact**

*Relokanty* are changing themselves and the cities of Yerevan and Tbilisi. *Relokanty* look critically at what is happening around them and try to adapt; for instance, they

are concerned about the infrastructure (e.g., garbage collection). In Yerevan, we heard from domestic experts that: “*The Russians have come to do the cleaning.*” *Relokanty* are challenging the norms of urban planning: informal buildings, high-rises without adequate parking, for example, in a seismic zone. With the arrival of *relokanty*, changes in some business segments are noticeable, including banking services, food delivery, rental agreements, restaurants, cafes, and beauty salons. Yerevan in particular has been flooded with cultural and educational offerings. Even the director of the House-Museum of the Armenian artist Martiros Saryan (1880–1972)—his granddaughter—has noted this. How will this affect local businesses? Can they withstand the competition? These are questions being asked by domestic experts. Many *relokanty* came with pets, so pet clinics are flourishing and the range of pet food has increased. “*Here it was not common to keep dogs at home, let alone cats. But now apartments are rented for people with animals, and there is a selection of pet food in the stores, which was not available before*”. New schools have been opened for the children of *relokanty* by the *relokanty* themselves.

As far as integration is concerned, it is a matter of perspective. In Yerevan, for example, *relokanty* were expected to be more active:

*An illustrative story: a month and a half ago,<sup>16</sup> there were elections to the Yerevan City Consul. It is not necessary to have citizenship to vote. You need a one-year residency requirement. [...] But it turned out that many [Russians] did not go [to vote], they were not interested in it, [and said] let the locals sort it out for themselves.*

Whereas in Tbilisi, the situation was quite different. One respondent told us: “*Georgians refuse to cooperate with us [Russians]. We are ready to integrate, but they do not want to work with us.*” According to one of our interview partners,

*Most relokanty live in “a mental Moscow”. It’s not that there is no adaptation; there isn’t even any interest in it. This does not please the locals very much. It causes particular tension in Georgia. But people live as they are used to. They watch Russian channels, read Russian news, eat Russian food, speak only in Russian and only about Russian problems. Their adaptation is limited to opening a bank account and drawing up documents. And they don’t want to fit into the local context, they don’t see the point.*

In Armenia, speaking only Russian was sufficient to solve most everyday problems. Urban spaces usually featured two or three languages (Armenian, Russian, and English), but not everyone liked that the Russians did not speak Armenian, however. For example, the catering sphere (“*Why can’t I order in Armenian at home?*”). A respondent in Yerevan told us: “*There is a loyal attitude to the Russian language here. [...] Here, the population has the kindest attitude. The Mir card<sup>17</sup> works here.*”

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<sup>16</sup> The respondent refers to the local elections on September 17, 2023 [Elections in Armenia 2023].

<sup>17</sup> The Mir card is the Russian card payment system, which offers debit cards, credit cards, and various other electronic payment systems. Since March 2024, there have been some restrictions in Armenia, but the Mir card is still in use.

In Georgia, however, knowing only Russian was often not enough. Another concern in Georgia was housing: “[T]here are occupied territories in Georgia. Plus, prices have risen very much, and young people—students from other cities in Georgia—cannot come and rent accommodation.<sup>18</sup> Russians have brought money, but the government doesn’t really understand how to regulate prices and what to do about it.” Additionally, people were not sure how to talk about the 2008 military conflict between Georgia and Russia. One Tbilisi resident worried: “[Do the Russians] know what happened in 2008, in Georgia? What are their [Russian] perspectives around the situation in Gory, for instance, about that currently occupied sector?”

In both Armenia and Georgia, people had complex attitudes towards Russia. The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh has become a factor in the deterioration of the Armenian population’s attitude towards Russia. According to a poll conducted in March 2023, only 50% of Armenians assessed Russian–Armenian relations as good; in October 2019, it was 93% [Yeganyan 2023]. Data from another survey conducted in March 2024, one year later, confirms the extent of anti-Russian sentiment: 23% of respondents were in favor of breaking off relations with Russia, and another 13% believed that such a break would be in Armenia’s interests [Navasardyan 2024].

In Georgia, the concentration of anti-Russian sentiment is much higher. For example, a poll from autumn 2022, suggests that 77% of Georgians believe that Russia is the biggest political threat to Georgia. Another survey conducted among Georgian youth (aged 14–29) suggests that young people would include “people from Russia” in categories of people denied entry to Georgia (together with “drug addicts” and “homosexuals”) [Krawatzek, Sasse 2024]. Despite this attitude, our domestic experts agreed that there is significant differentiation between the Russian government and Russian people in their countries: “Russia and Russians are not the same.” As one Georgian expert recalled:

*I had these kinds of thoughts and doubts, but I remember how it was when I saw a Russian woman with three children trying to cross the street. And she looked really, really scared. She’s just a woman [...] she has three babies, who were really little. And what can you do in this situation? And it’s really hard at that point when you see the person not as someone who is Russian but as a person who is a mother with three daughters.*

Perhaps recent war experiences in both countries, in addition to the trauma of genocide in Armenia, have helped foster a more humane perspective on people seeking security in the broader sense of that word.

## Conclusion and Outlook

Our study shows that the dichotomy of compulsion vs. choice is not sufficient to describe the motives of *relokanty*. Instead, their motivations range along a continuum from extreme duress to complete freedom.

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<sup>18</sup> Some Georgian students decided to take an academic leave, because they could not afford to rent a room in Tbilisi. The system of dormitories is rather poor in Georgia.

Extreme duress characterizes the migration of political activists, who are threatened with repression and possible imprisonment in Russia. Their departure is necessary for preserving their freedom and sometimes even their lives. The Ministry of Justice updates a weekly list of undesirable organizations and foreign agents, which influences the migration of political activists. Their return to Russia would only be possible if this repression were stopped, which would most likely happen only with a regime change. This group self-identifies as the opposition and encompasses both those who criticize the authorities for starting the military conflict and those who criticize the authorities for failing to achieve decisive military victories. The opposition covers a broad ideological spectrum.

Those fleeing mobilization are also in a situation of extreme compulsion, as they did not want to be sent to the front. Their flight from Russia was of a panicked nature, and their numbers include many who had been promised an exemption, such as workers in the IT sector. Their political leanings range from openly pro-Putin to complete apolitical. For them, return is possible when the mobilization ends, although many have already returned, reassured by promises from the authorities.

People whose migration was a choice, we have referred to as travelers. They used the migration boom as a window of opportunity—as colleagues, friends, and relatives moved abroad, they were able to put their travel plans into motion. Their migration also forced employers to offer more remote work options. They are free to return whenever they wish, completely independent of the political regime.

For Russian expats, the choice to leave was not binary. While they were not under any strict compulsion, their departure was connected to the withdrawal of Western firms from the Russian market and the imposition of sanctions, including limits on bank transfers and the use of certain software. They could have tried to find work in the Russian labor market, especially with the exodus of *relokanty*; however, this work might not have the same income, prestige, or opportunities for professional growth. The return of this group depends on the duration of Western sanctions and the conditions offered by foreign labor markets.

Finally, ideological opponents of the war are in a special position in terms of forced migration. While they are not threatened unless they become political activists, make public statements, or engage in anti-war propaganda, they experience the war as an agonizing break with their values and moral principles. They can live and work in Russia, perhaps migrating internally, or they can choose to leave altogether. This is a special kind of compulsion, in which the driving factors are intangible.

The group of accompanying persons should not be forgotten or underestimated, especially the children. In his research on political repression, Hirschman [1970] suggests that citizens have only three options to survive under these kinds of systems: migrate, including internal migration (exit), protest (voice), or try to adapt to the current situation with the hope that it may change sooner or later (loyalty). In our study, we looked at those individuals who decided to exit and their reasons for doing so. More time is needed to determine whether this will be a short-term or long-term migration and how it will impact Russia, the two host countries of Armenia and Georgia, and the global community. The new Russian migration has re-opened old wounds (the Russo–Georgian military conflict) and created new ones (the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh) and intensified discussions about Russian imperialism. The new Russian migration has challenged Georgia and Armenia, small South-Caucasian host countries with no previous experience

of this level of migration and further strengthened the (sometimes virtual) links between them and the sending country (Russia). These are all important new trends to observe in migration studies.

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## Новые мигранты (релоканты) из России в Армении и Грузии: вызовы и возможности

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Военный конфликт между Россией и Украиной вызвал волну миграции из России. Мигрантов новой волны называют релокантами как в СМИ, так и в обыденных разговорах. Важно отметить, что и они сами пользуются этим термином для самоидентификации<sup>19</sup>.

Релоканты активно изучаются, более того, многочисленные публикации по этой теме подготовлены самими релокантами. Возникает своеобразный феномен «релокантской науки», когда уехавшие ученые изучают себе подобных; в этом случае возникает риск переноса на объект исследования собственных суждений. В то же время обескураживающе выглядит и попытка всех опрошенных мигрантов, покинувших Россию после февраля 2022 г., отождествлять с политическими мигрантами и анализировать как гомогенную группу. Наше исследование опровергает эти суждения: ни чувство вины, ни критика российских действий, ни страх транснациональных репрессий не являются тотальными и присущими всем релокантам. Степень их политизации существенно различается, что отражается в мотивах миграции и условиях возвращения, и нам представляется принципиально важным избежать неоправданной политизации оснований релокации.

Цель статьи – выделить миграционные установки релокантов, а также описать репертуар их действий, сопровождающих миграционный процесс. Исследование выполнено в качественной методологии. Мы предлагали информантам свободную форму диалога, корректируя ход беседы рамочными вопросами. Фактически, это были нарративы, где пространно и свободно излагались причины отъезда, сопутствующие обстоятельства и планы на будущее. Мы не претендуем на то, что на основе проведенного исследования сможем определить степень распространенности тех или иных мотиваций, способы решения проблем, связанных с миграцией, но, с другой стороны, качественная методология позволяет выявить спектр мотивов релокации, а также показать способы легитимации своего выбора.

Интервью были проведены в ноябре 2023 г. в Ереване (15 интервью с релокантами и 5 с местными экспертами) и в декабре того же года в Тбилиси (17 интервью с релокантами и 3 с экспертами).

Поиск респондентов осуществлялся методом «снежного кома» со множеством точек входа с целью избежать попадания в один кластер похожих историй. Точки входа определялись заранее, до поездки в Армению и Грузию. Гайд интервью включал следующие блоки: (а) причины отъезда из России, реакция окружающих, выбор места релокации; (б) жизнь на новом месте, источники дохода, возможность работы, круг общения, досуг; (в) планы на будущее, условия возвращения в Россию.

Интервью с экспертами из числа местных жителей (академические ученые, журналисты, политические активисты) помогли уловить настроения принимающей стороны.

Анализ интервью позволил выделить шесть мотивационных типов релокантов:

- «идейные релоканты»,
- «политические активисты»,
- «бегущие от мобилизации»,
- «профессионалы»,
- «путешественники»,
- «с любимыми не расставайтесь».

<sup>19</sup> Например, в Ереване открыли бар «Релокант».

Безусловно, каждый релокант мог руководствоваться сложным комплексом миграционных установок, то есть совмещать различные мотивы. Однако в нарративах релокантов присутствовал лейтмотив, основная причина миграции. Мы позволим себе не только описать мотивационные типы релокантов, но и проиллюстрировать их на примере конкретных кейсов.

### *«Идейные релоканты»*

В основе миграции «идейных релокантов» лежит принципиальное несогласие с внешней политикой, проводимой Россией. Они категорически против вооруженного конфликта и называют его «войной», что противоречит официальной терминологии Кремля. Их решение уехать основано на морально-этических и ценностных позициях, причем, как правило, они и до отъезда были явными или латентными критиками политического курса нынешней российской власти. Военная операция стала последней каплей, окончательным аргументом в пользу разрыва со страной, которую они резко осудили. На вопрос «Почему уехали из России?» ответ формулируется быстро и однозначно в терминах неприятия войны и возложения вины на Россию.

Такие релоканты, даже если решение о миграции было принято быстро и без колебаний, не испытывали необходимости срочного отъезда и могли планомерно готовить переезд – выбирать страну, решать вопросы с недвижимостью и другим имуществом (продать, сдать в аренду, подарить и пр.), готовить пакет документов для легализации своего статуса на новом месте жительства (перевод документов, рекомендательные письма и пр.). Впрочем, не исключен и импульсивный характер действий, когда *«все бросил и уехал, потому что не мог оставаться в стране-агрессоре»*, что более характерно для одиноких молодых людей. Семейный статус предполагает ответственность за семью, что удерживает от импульсивных поступков, и в этом случае моральные основания для переезда сочетаются с прагматичным алгоритмом реализации этого проекта. Но каким бы протяженным во времени ни был процесс подготовки к миграции, «идейные релоканты» однозначно указывают момент принятия решения – конец февраля 2022 г., начало военных действий.

«Идейные релоканты» разделяют идею политических свобод и приветствуют вестернизированный образ жизни, характеризуют атмосферу в России как «душную», «некомфортную». Соответственно, «идейные» ориентированы не столько на переживание военных действий, сколько на начало новой жизни в более приемлемой для себя среде, т. е. нацелены на эмиграцию всерьез и надолго с соответствующей интеграцией в принимающее сообщество, выбирая страну с учетом многих составляющих.

Характерный кейс – молодая москвичка, представитель творческой интеллигенции. *«С первого же дня войны я знала, что не останусь в России. Мою семью можно назвать оппозиционной, но родители уехать не могут, у отца бизнес»*. Судя по всему, девушка из состоятельной семьи (много путешествовала с родителями по Европе, закончила один из престижнейших вузов страны) и выбрала Тбилиси лишь на первое время. Она не собирается связывать свою жизнь с Грузией. *«Мне нравится дух Тбилиси, возможно, я бы здесь и осталась, но грузины очень*

*тяжело дают вид на жительство. А гражданство получить вообще нереально. Грузия – бедная страна, тут высокий уровень безработицы. И у них нет того, что у нас называется обязательным медицинским страхованием. <...> Наверно, переберусь в Европу».* Кроме того, она считает, что в России ей будет трудно реализоваться профессионально ввиду сокращения творческих свобод, то есть политический мотив срачивается с прагматическим. Речь девушки изобилует риторикой обличения действующей власти, вовлеченностью в политический дискурс. «Они украли у меня, испоганили все, что мне было дорого». Тех, кто остался, клеймит как людей «с толстой кожей» и «без совести». При этом она ездит в Москву по мере необходимости – получить диплом, навестить родителей, полечить зубы.

### «Политические активисты»

Военные действия легитимировали жесткость репрессий против противников действующей власти: власть дает понять, что времена изменились, и то, что было позволительно раньше, в новых условиях будет решительно караться. Соответственно, те, кто принимал участие в разных формах политического активизма, направленного против «режима», выехали из России.

Группа «политических активистов» крайне неоднородна с точки зрения драматичности переезда и степени его вынужденности. На одном полюсе находятся те, кто буквально убежал из страны, спасаясь от судебного преследования. Такие релоканты находятся в розыске и могут вернуться в РФ только при кардинальной смене политического режима, и многие демонстрируют веру в возможность такого сценария; кто-то пытается конвертировать свой статус «борца с режимом» в реноме «главного эксперта по России в изгнании»; а кто-то, наоборот, на новом месте дистанцируется от политики, выбирая для себя научную карьеру, создание стартапа, обучение новой специальности. При всей несхожести поведения на новом месте их объединяет убеждение, что при «режиме Путина» оставаться им было опасно. Они выписали себе билет в одну сторону, обосновывая свое решение о релокации разговорами об опасности.

На другом полюсе находятся сотрудники организаций, признанных в России нежелательными или иностранными агентами. Такие организации предложили своим сотрудникам коллективный переезд, помогая финансово и организационно: так, покинули страну российские офисы известных международных некоммерческих организаций, признанных иностранными агентами. Коллективный переезд нежелательных организаций явился самым мягким вариантом релокации, поскольку сотрудники сохранили работу и доход.

Выбор между Арменией и Грузией для «политических активистов» очевиден. Ввиду отсутствия дипотношений между Грузией и Россией закавказская республика не имеет обязательств по экстрадиции лиц по запросу российской стороны. Те, кто находится в России в розыске, на кого заведены уголовные дела, однозначно предпочитают Грузию. Это не означает, что в Армении нет бежавших из России «политических активистов», но все же их основная масса концентрируется в Грузии.

В Тбилиси уехал 16-летний молодой человек Н., объявленный в России в розыск как член экстремистской организации – молодежного движения, которое первоначально существовало при партии (не парламентской, но довольно известной), но затем партийные боссы изгнали молодежь за излишний максимализм. Оставшись без партийного контроля, молодые люди стали действовать отчаянно и рискованно. *«Мы устроили перформанс – ритуальное захоронение донецкого солдата в обувной коробке. Устроили альтернативный “Бессмертный полк” – понесли плакаты разбомбленных украинских городов».* За такие «перформансы» их вызвали на допрос в полицию. *«Когда вышел после первого допроса, сразу позвонил в фонд Х. Мне предложили на выбор: или они оплачивают мне адвоката, или билет в Грузию. Я выбрал второе. Выбрал Грузию, потому что у России с Грузией нет дипломатических отношений».* С тех пор в России он не был, выпускные экзамены не сдавал, документа об окончании школы у него нет. *«У мамы на нервной почве началась крапивница. Но сейчас все хорошо, она уехала с сестрой жить в Польшу, работает на заводе [в России женщина была театральным режиссером – прим. авторов], денег мало, поэтому я надеюсь только на себя».* На момент интервью молодой человек страдал депрессией и мечтал уехать учиться в европейский или американский университет. Правда, для этого нужно выучить английский язык. *«Я учу по бесплатным программам».* В Армению, соседнюю страну, ни разу не ездил. *«В Армении не безопасно. У меня статья “реабилитация нацизма”, а в армянском законодательстве тоже есть такая статья. Ереван может выдавать по запросу России, а здесь нет. Ереван более пророссийский, там жестко прекратили все проукраинские акции».*

Другой наш собеседник А. – участник нашумевшей группы, известной скандальными перформансами против РПЦ, – оценив риски, решил уехать из России. Грузию выбрал как страну с явно выраженной риторикой вступления в Евросоюз и общим прозападным вектором развития, тогда как Армению с ее членством в ОДКБ и ЕАЭС (Евразийский экономический союз) считал слишком «пророссийской». *«Мне нравится, что большинство грузин хотят в Евросоюз».*

Правда, с течением времени появилась проблема: власти Грузии отказались превращать страну в хаб российской оппозиции или просто не захотели раздражать Москву. Так или иначе, но власти Грузии чинят препятствия для миграции «политических активистов» из России. Так, мигрант А. делится: *«У меня давно вышел срок легального пребывания в Грузии, но я не делаю visa-run, чтобы не рисковать, многих не пускают обратно. Поэтому я не езжу ни на отдых, ни на конференции. У меня собака. С кем она останется, если меня не пустят?».*

### *«Бегущие от мобилизации»*

Этот тип представлен молодыми людьми призывного возраста, которые не хотят служить в армии; зачастую их сопровождают подруги и жены, которые не имеют собственных миграционных намерений, но тем не менее уезжают со своими мужчинами. Крайне разнообразные политические взгляды этой группы не мешали им оставаться в России в течение семи месяцев ведения военных действий – с февраля по сентябрь 2022 г., когда была объявлена частичная мобилизация;

многие из них даже не помышляли о миграции. Их отъезд носил ярко выраженный панический характер, эмоционально заражая тех, кому государство предоставляло бронь от мобилизации. *«Все побежали, и я побежал»; «У меня был друг абсолютно пропутинских взглядов, но он сбежал, когда началась мобилизация, то есть он такой же патриот, только не хочет воевать. А пока воевали другие, он все это поддерживал».*

Миграция этой группы – импульсивный шаг, плохо подготовленный и непланируемый, следовательно, молодые люди не успевали решить имущественные вопросы, продумать финансовую составляющую, договориться с работодателем о возможности дистанционной работы. Их целью было любой ценой пересечь границу, чтобы не попасть в армию. Бегство от мобилизации диктовало отношение к миграции как к временной мере, посему в этой группе усилия по интеграции (изучение местных языков, поиск постоянной работы, приобретение жилья и пр.) не наблюдались. «Бегущие от мобилизации» – это мигранты, надеющиеся на возвращение.

В Ереване мы встретились с ребятами из Москвы, которые впятером снимали дом на окраине города, зарабатывая ремонтом электроники. Они уехали в первые дни мобилизации; за 14 месяцев жизни в Ереване ни разу не выезжали за его пределы, не посетили ни одного спектакля, концерта и пр. В качестве самого памятного события жизни в миграции упомянули, как в доме прорвало трубы и затопило пол. На вопрос о девушках один из них ответил: *«Я контактирую с девушкой один раз в месяц, когда стрижусь в парикмахерской».* Другой молодой человек из этой компании вернулся в Москву: *«Не смог больше, там его девушка осталась».* Характерно, что в ходе интервью ребята избегали любые оценки политической ситуации, осторожно подбирая слова, чтобы избежать критики России. При этом Москву вспоминали с ностальгией: *«Я все это время не сдавал московскую квартиру, настолько хорошая, что сдавать жалко. Я все средства в нее вкладывал. Но все затянулось, пришлось найти риелтора».*

В Ереване женщина, приютившая несколько друзей из России, «бегущих от мобилизации», рассказала, что один из них начал сильно пить (*«Не успевали выносить бутылки»*), погрузился в депрессию и в конце концов вернулся в Россию.

### «Профессионалы»

Изменения в экономической и банковской сферах привели к тому, что некоторые профессионалы столкнулись с невозможностью продолжать свою деятельность, оставаясь на территории России. Многие западные компании объявили об уходе из России, и наиболее ценные сотрудники получили предложение переехать жить и работать в зарубежные офисы этих компаний. Сотрудникам пришлось выбирать между переездом и потерей работы, и, учитывая, что в крупных глобальных компаниях заработные платы, как правило, довольно высокие, многие сотрудники приняли это предложение.

В этом же ряду стоят те, кто работал дистанционно на зарубежного работодателя и получал оплату на валютный счет, однако с началом военных действий валютные переводы стали затруднены. Молодая женщина N.: *«Я одна кормлю двух*

детей. У меня оформлено ИП, мой заказчик – швейцарская фирма, фактически я работаю на них уже несколько лет. Как только все это началось, сразу встал вопрос: как я буду получать зарплату? А что я буду делать, если мне заблокируют программные продукты? Через пару недель я уехала в Ереван».

Визитной карточкой этой группы релокантов в Армении и Грузии стали молодые люди и девушки с ноутбуком, занимающие столики в кафе с Wi-Fi, а для местного населения понятия «релокант» и «айтишник» стали синонимами [Denisova-Schmidt 2025]. Такое отождествление связано с тем, что у релокантов-профессионалов есть деньги, соответственно, они заметны как потребители. Житель Еревана поделился наблюдением: «Релоканты живут у нас замечательно. Все центральные улицы, все кафе – они там. Летом в бассейн придешь – и там они, а абонемент стоит немалых денег. Кто снимает квартиры в центре? Опять русские айтишники». Вполне очевидно, что те, живущие втроем в частном доме на окраине Еревана и подрабатывающие починкой электроники, менее заметны для обывателя.

Принимающая сторона при правильном подходе может сильно выиграть от притока этой группы, и власти Армении это хорошо понимают: например, для специалистов в области информационных технологий созданы льготные условия регистрации и налогообложения. Спустя полтора года после начала военных действий изменения в цифровой среде Армении стали очень заметны. «Когда я приехал в Ереван в мае 2022 года, то это был, конечно, удар. Ни доставки продуктов толком, ни нормальных банковских приложений. Все какое-то допотопное, разобратся невозможно. <...> Сейчас это вполне приличные сервисы, не московский уровень, но шаг вперед огромный». Другой наш собеседник, ученый-обществовед Д., уехал из опасения, что его научную тему (социальный активизм, политические протесты) сочтут неблагонадежной: «Это если и не запрет напрямую, но отсутствие профессиональной перспективы».

В ряду тех, чей переезд связан с профессиональной деятельностью, немало тех, кто так или иначе связан с ЛГБТ<sup>20</sup>, трансгендерами, childfree и пр. – это врачи, юристы, психологи, активисты и другие. Поскольку на фоне продолжающегося конфликта усилилась политическая кампания, нацеленная на агитацию традиционных ценностей, пропаганду ЛГБТ запретили законом, а childfree объявили разрушительной идеологией. Соответственно, те, кто работал с этим контингентом, почувствовали тревогу, и некоторые предпочли оказывать профессиональные услуги дистанционно, находясь вне РФ.

Релоканты-«профессионалы» ведут себя подчеркнуто деполитизировано. Они акцентируют сугубо профессиональные мотивы переезда и в разговоре старательно обходят политическую составляющую. Что характерно, многие избегают слова «война», используя не официальное название «специальная военная операция», а аморфное «это» («когда это началось...», «когда это закончится...»).

### «Путешественники»

Некоторые релоканты признаются, что миграционная волна, поднятая российско-украинским конфликтом, дала им возможность по-новому взглянуть на возмож-

<sup>20</sup> ЛГБТ – экстремистская организация, запрещенная на территории России.

ность путешествовать, менять страны, сравнивать условия жизни. В социальных сетях, в обыденных разговорах миграция становится популярной темой, что ставит под сомнение ценность оседлости, создает соблазн приобщиться к новым моделям жизни, неотъемлемо связанным с пространственной мобильностью. Возникает страх упустить неведомые возможности *«пока молодой»*. Когда среди друзей, соседей, коллег, родственников появляются те, кто решился на отъезд, проект с переездом начинает казаться более реалистичным, поскольку есть те, к кому можно обратиться за советом или у кого можно элементарно остановиться на первое время.

Некоторые представители «путешественников» вспоминали, что *«давно хотели где-нибудь пожить, сменить обстановку»*, но не могли решиться. Кроме того, некоторые фирмы, адаптируясь к отъезду сотрудников, вынуждены были согласиться на дистанционный режим работы. «Путешественники» использовали создавшуюся ситуацию как окно возможностей. *«Почему бы не пожить в более теплом климате? Я и раньше об этом задумывался, а теперь это стало, как бы поточнее сказать, проще, что ли»*.

Представители этой группы не озвучивают претензий к России, они погружены в новый опыт и в зависимости от того, как он складывается, планируют дальнейшую жизнь. На вопрос «Что дальше? Каковы планы?» у многих нет ответа. Подобная миграция является исключительно добровольной. Но в отличие от «идейных релокантов», которые тоже добровольно покидают Россию, у «путешественников» меньше претензий к своей стране. *«Просто подумал: а почему бы и нет?»*.

*«Все едут, чего бы нам тоже не поехать. Могу привести пример своего друга, который почти год прожил в Сербии, а политические взгляды у него совершенно пропутинские. Он уехал, потому что он – айтишник, и ему хотелось пожить за границей. Потом вернулся. Это вообще не про позицию, не про политический активизм, это стадное чувство “все побежали, и я побежал”»*, – рассказывает молодой человек из Екатеринбурга.

### *«С любимыми не расставайтесь»*

Этот лозунг озвучивают подруги, жены, мужья тех, кто по идейным, профессиональным или иным мотивам не мог оставаться в России. Вместе с бегущими от мобилизации на Верхнем Ларсе стояли и девушки, которым мобилизация не грозила. Уехавшие «профессионалы» забрали с собой жен и мужей. Подруги «политических активистов» уподобились декабристкам, правда, поехали не в Сибирь, а в теплые края.

Группа сопровождения выполняет очень важную функцию поддержки в сложный период адаптации на новом месте. Поскольку «бегущие от мобилизации» или «политические активисты» боялись возвращаться в Россию, то именно их подруги взяли на себя решение бытовых и финансовых вопросов, завязанных на Россию. *«Я как уехал, ни разу в России не был, береженого бог бережет, не уверен, что смогу снова пройти паспортный контроль. Все вопросы улаживает жена, она у меня как челнок, туда-сюда ездит»*, – рассказывает молодой человек из Екатеринбурга.

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Подчеркнем, что возможна и смена мотивов релокации по мере проживания за рубежом. Например, первоначально бежали от мобилизации и надеялись на скорое возвращение, но военный конфликт затянулся. Кто-то нашел хорошую работу, оценил «зеленый свет», который включили для айтишников власти Армении, например. И вот уже профессиональная мотивация держит его в стране вне зависимости от истории с мобилизацией. А кто-то работу не нашел и вынужден был искать для проживания более дешевую, чем Грузия или Армения, страну: переехал в Тайланд, потом во Вьетнам, Лаос и превратился в заядлого путешественника по юго-восточной Азии. Отмена мобилизации уже не является гарантией их возвращения, так как первоначальный выталкивающий фактор преобразовался в разнообразные силы притяжения.

Краткая сравнительная характеристика мотивационных типов представлена в таблице.

Типы	Основная причина миграции	Условие возвращения в РФ	Лейтмотив интервью
Идейные релоканты	Идейный протест против войны	Окончание военных действий, возвращение к либеральной идеологии	«Нет войне»
Политические активисты	Угроза репрессий	Смена политического режима	Долой авторитаризм
Бегущие от мобилизации	Частичная мобилизация	Окончание военных действий как гарантия того, что не будет новой мобилизации	Воевать должны контрактники
Профессионалы	Уход работодателей из РФ, затруднения банковских и технологических транзакций	Возращение ситуации к довоенному времени	Работа превыше всего
Путешественники	Миграция среди окружения	Усталость от путешествий, требование работодателей вернуться в офлайн	Посмотреть мир, пока молодой
«С любимыми не расставайтесь»	Отъезд близких	Возвращение близких	Быть рядом с близкими

**Ключевые слова:** миграция, релоканты, российско-украинский военный конфликт, Армения, Грузия

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