Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe

Edited by **Anna-Liisa Heusala, Kaarina Aitamurto and Sherzod Eraliev**

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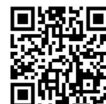

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Mutual Impact of Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Illiberalism is a political view and agenda that impacts state–society relations in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe, and migrant diaspora communities in other regions. This chapter underlines the need to understand how illiberal states manage migration to absorb resistance, and how migration may impact the illiberal political agenda and policymaking. These processes often hap-

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pen over a long period and involve a complex set of legal and administrative decisions. The driving forces of illiberalism are shared by different political systems and often have transnational features, while being anchored on local and national circumstances and rationale. Exploring how illiberalism influences and is influenced by global migration trends in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe offers insights into the complex interplay between political regimes and transnational mobility, and helps to conceptualize illiberalism for the study of politics and government.

Keywords: illiberalism, migration, Russia, Eurasia, Eastern Europe, autocratic governance, political regimes

Introduction

This edited volume is built around two big societal challenges, often existing alongside each other: global migration and illiberal politics. We focus on Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe (REEE), a region in a significant part of which we can still observe the resilience of illiberal state politics and extensive migratory flows. While the management of migration, particularly in Russia, has garnered considerable attention, there exists a gap in the theorization of the mutual impact among illiberal state politics, policymaking, and global migration, particularly within the broader REEE area.[1] Further exploration is warranted to understand how autocratic governance influences and is influenced by global migration trends, offering insights into the complex interplay between political regimes and transnational mobility in this dynamic geopolitical context.

Migration to, from, and within the REEE area has been a part of flows and processes between the Global North and Global South, but also a part of the building of past empires. Global migration is on one hand a story of wars, refugees from persecution, limited opportunities, and economic hardship, and on the other a process of transferring knowledge and talent, economic globalization, the birth of new innovations, and cultural development. Historically, the impact of migration in many fields, such

as economy and culture, has been enormous. In addition to these areas, migration affects national politics, global inequality, urbanization, local communities, the travel of ideas, cultural renewal, institutional development, labour markets, innovation, education, and social policy, as well as foreign and security policy. Migration also requires transnational solutions as a part of national and regional migration policy. New migration flows and processes can be expected due to political upheavals, environmental degradation, and climate change.

Migration is also a policy area which tests the resilience and preparedness of receiving states. An important aspect to consider is the nexus between illiberalism and global migration, which may advance negative recycling of local and regional practices that slow down or hinder the democratization or institutionalization of good governance. Globally, migration may generate strong reactions and ad hoc responses, galvanize populist movements, and bring to the surface questions related to illiberalism. Migration can also be an important economic tool for authoritarian regimes to stabilize the political and social landscape in their societies. And it can be used as political capital or a weapon in foreign relations (Natter 2023, 11). The number of illiberal democracies is rising; globally, eight in ten people lived in a 'partly free' or 'not free' country in 2021 (Freedom House 2022). Moreover, according to a growing consensus among scholars, illiberalism is on the rise across liberal democracies too (Timbro 2019; Hadj-Abdou 2021).

Empirically, illiberalism puts state–society relations in the focus of attention and asks what causes or contributes to the development of a certain type of relationship. For instance, Glasius (2018) emphasizes a practical perspective that sheds light on the organizational and social context—in other words, what people will do within the structures of the state based on their shared rules. The rights of the population and the accountability of authorities are at the core of this relationship. Investigating illiberalism in state–society relations vis-à-vis global migration should sensitize the researcher to look for certain kinds of elements in governmental policymaking, implementation, and the outcomes of politics.

The perspective of this edited volume is a multidisciplinary one that brings together theoretical and methodological approaches from a variety of fields, such as political science, history, legal studies, sociology, and media studies. Each chapter presents an independent case study, and together they create a multifaceted view on the nexus between migration and illiberal politics. The chapters represent examples of the various effects of illiberalism on policymaking and policy implementation, as well as the interlinkages between illiberal politics in sending countries and emigrant communities abroad.

We underline the need to continue to critically engage and challenge the established conceptions regarding the politics around migration in illiberal states. Exploring the connection between illiberalism and global migration will help to uncover problems and opportunities that global migration presents to societies and to illiberalism as politics. Recently, migration scholars have begun to call into question the validity of assumptions based on migration governance in liberal democracies (Natter 2018b; Pisarevskaya et al. 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Urinboyev 2020). A growing number of international migrants live and work in countries that are not counted as liberal democracies, requiring that an understanding of the 'regime effect' in migration governance includes more than an exploration of 'one side of the coin only'—'Western liberal democracies' (Natter 2021). Urinboyev and Eraliev (2022) have pointed out that in contemporary literature on migration regimes, typologies primarily focus on Western-style democracies despite the fact that many migration hubs are non-democratic. They argue that 'relatively little attention has been devoted to the variations and similarities in immigration policymaking within and across authoritarian regimes' (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022, 12). Writing about immigrant populations outside of the territorial boundaries of non-democratic regimes, Glasius (2018) has discussed how the extraterritorial dimension of authoritarian rule is connected to the nature and resilience of contemporary authoritarian rule itself. She points out how authoritarian states tolerate and even sponsor migration and have learned to manage the risks

that it poses to them. Most importantly, authoritarian migration management approaches its populations abroad not as citizens with rights but as objects to be used for various political goals in differing roles. Her conclusion is that the authoritarian rule is not a territorially bounded regime type but a mode of governing through a distinct set of practices.

Urinboyev and Eraliev (2022) state that in established democracies, the abuse of power and curtailing of migrant rights are constrained by regard for international human rights obligations, active civil society, and appeals to independent courts, while non-democratic regimes do not offer such guarantees of legal certainty. In addition, large shadow economies with adjunct corruptive informal structures and practices worsen the situation considerably. Citing Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke (2012), they note that non-democratic regimes can both restrict the human rights of their populations and ignore the populations' anti-migration sentiments, which then enables them to make top-down policy decisions more freely regarding migration. In addition, as Schenk (2021) points out, the failings or weaknesses of governance, such as corruption and informality, can be deliberately employed by authorities in illiberal regimes to pursue both their own and the state's interests in a particular policy sector.

Building on the 'liberal paradox' concept, scholars have suggested a concept of 'illiberal paradox'. Like liberal democracies, illiberal and authoritarian governments are bound by global economic liberalism, and as a result, they have the same incentives to encourage immigration openness. However, unlike liberal democracies, they are less dependent on those utilizing the democratic processes that are seen to be the driving forces behind restrictive immigration policies (such as election cycles and public opinion), or on the national courts' interpretations of migration rules. Ultimately, authoritarian leaders can implement pro-immigration policies more quickly than their democratic counterparts, even though they must also balance the conflicting interests of institutional and economic actors (Natter 2018a). The illiberal paradox 'does not imply that autocracies do enact more liberal policies

than democracies, but it suggests that autocracies can liberalize their immigration rules more easily than democracies if they wish so, that is, if it fits the broader economic goals, foreign policy agenda, or domestic political priorities of the regime in place' (Natter 2021, 118).

Although there is a growing amount of research on global migration in REEE, and a vast body of literature on the societal, political, and economic transformations in the region over the past 30 years, the specificities of links between illiberalism and migration in this region have typically not been explicitly or thoroughly explored. Our premise is that looking at this connection will not only create new empirical research on global migration in the REEE area but also help to make the conceptualization of illiberalism more relevant for the study of political and administrative practices and ways of thinking in this region. In addition, we see that examining illiberalism vis-à-vis migration in this region well illustrates the global socio-political tendencies in many other parts of the world. In this examination, we attempt to cover a multitude of human and ideational processes and flows which impact global migration because of illiberal tendencies, as well as the impact which migration has on illiberalism as a political force.

Illiberalism

The academic use of the concept of illiberalism has gained popularity in the wake of shifts in world politics, as well as social and political polarization in the Western world, including in former socialist Eastern Europe. Almost since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have used different descriptions of unfavourable outcomes of transitions, oligarchic leaderships, and non-democratic governmental policies to capture what is not a fully functioning liberal democracy. Illiberalism is typically defined by a rejection of liberal-democratic values such as the rule of law, individual rights, and civil liberties, and an embrace of authoritarianism and nationalism. The term has been used to refer to both political ideologies and regimes (Rosenblatt 2021). It is often

used interchangeably with terms such as 'democratic backsliding', 'populism', 'hybrid regime', 'illiberal democracy', or '(electoral) authoritarianism'. Overall, the scholarly community's targets of criticism can be seen as following the agenda set by authoritarian and illiberal leaders and interest groups that publicly label the liberal-democratic model not only unsuitable for their countries but even a collapsing system.

For instance, democratic backsliding has been defined by Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018) as a range of negative phenomena that impact the democratic regime with the threat of authoritarian reversal. They emphasize, among other things, growing partisan control over state agencies, media, and civil society; the dismantling of checks and balances; and the creation of an anti-liberal ideology. Galston (2018, 11) has defined the threat to democracy posed by populism as one in which there is a sceptical view of formal institutions and procedures that impede majorities 'working their will', and which views individual and minority rights critically.

The 'hybrid regime' has received attention as a form of a government in between authoritarianism and full democracy (Ekman 2009; Morlino 2011; Mufti 2018), often a balancing act which includes strong legacies of the illiberal past. Considering election regime, political and civil rights, horizontal accountability, and effective power to govern, Merkel (2004) shows that over half of all the new electoral democracies at the time of his study represented specific variants of diminished sub-types of democracy, which he called *defective democracies*. Levitsky and Way (2002, 52) have criticized the general term 'hybrid regime', because 'different mixes of authoritarian and democratic features have distinct historical roots, and they may have different implications for economic performance, human rights, and the prospects for democracy'. Instead, they choose to distinguish between electoral authoritarianism (prevalent in the post-Soviet area), full authoritarianism, and unstable, ineffective delegative democracies. The concept of a hybrid regime could be limited to the description of political development rather than being seen as a

definitive government type. In this way, it includes the structural elements of a full democracy, namely laws and institutions, while emphasizing the political goals and governance practices of non-democratic systems.

In recent years, this conceptual heterogeneity has led scholars to engage in discussions about the clarity and empirical usefulness of popular terms. This development has coincided with scholars critically assessing the diffusion of the liberal-democratic model as contributing to the return of authoritarianism (e.g., Deneen 2018; Kravtsev and Holmes 2020). This line of scholarly attention has been directed at the critical review of neoliberalism and its consequences in different political environments, which has given birth to the concept of neoliberal authoritarianism. It focuses on various governing practices of capitalist systems which marginalize, discipline, and control populations, such as prioritizing constitutional and legal mechanisms and the centralization of state powers by the executive branch over more inclusive governance (Bruff and Tansel 2019, 234).

'Illiberalism' has become a general term which it is hoped will capture various outcomes of problematic democratization and globalization. It differs from the globalization studies economic perspective by emphasizing the identity politics and cultural processes resulting from globalization. Kauth and King (2020) describe illiberalism as an overarching perspective which sheds light on practices and ways of thought which can be found in both non-democratic and democratic societies alike. Because of this, they propose that a definition should be based on either an opposition to procedural democratic norms (disruptive illiberalism) or an ideological struggle (ideological illiberalism). Laruelle (2022) defines illiberalism as a new ideological universe, dissociated from regime types, democratic erosion, and authoritarianism. She points to its permanent oppositional relation to liberalism and sees it as a concept which can offer insights not covered by such notions as conservatism, the far right, or populism. Illiberalism, then, proposes solutions that are majoritarian; that underline nationhood or sovereignty, traditional hierarchies, and cultural

homogeneity; and that shift attention from politics to culture (Laruelle 2022, 304).

Laruelle builds her definition of illiberalism on five major building blocks (metanarratives) of liberalism, which illiberalism both refutes and mixes arbitrarily at the same time. The first is classic political liberalism of individual freedoms protected from state interference and democracy, which includes checks and balances, limiting majoritarianism. The second is economic liberalism based on curbing the role of the state in the markets through deregulation, privatization, and free trade agreements, which in its neoliberal form is pushed forward by states and supranational institutions. The third is cultural liberalism, which stresses not only individual rights but especially identity rights. The fourth is so-called geopolitical liberalism or the global attractiveness of American soft power, followed by the fifth metanarrative of liberal colonialism, in which liberal democracy is linked closely with modernization (Laruelle 2022, 312–313).

As Laruelle points out, illiberalism often attempts to decouple liberalism from democracy. It accepts elections and majoritarianism but at least partly denies democratic institutions. Illiberal views are often based on the idea—shared also by, for instance, leftist critiques—that liberal democracy is severely compromised by liberal economic policies which exclude large segments of the society. Even as many illiberal parties and regimes may implement neoliberal policies, and build questionable close relations with the business world, their politics critique globalized neoliberal economic policies. Furthermore, illiberalism strongly opposes cultural liberalism, and in Central and Eastern Europe, neoliberalism and cultural liberalism are often seen to be negative outcomes of post-socialist transitions. As regards the dominance of the US-led liberal world order, illiberalism has national variations (Laruelle 2022, 314–315).

Drawing on the discussions briefly presented here, we define and concentrate on illiberalism as a political view and agenda that impacts state–society relations globally, and both the REEE area and migrant diaspora communities outside of it. Illiberalism

in this context is neither a substitute for non-democratic political regimes, such as authoritarian or hybrid regimes, nor a fully established ideology, such as Marxism or liberalism. It is rather a collection of beliefs and values, and of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation. All of these factors impact the perception of migration, the creation and implementation of migration policies, and the outcomes for individual migrants. Illiberalism exists in various types of political systems, including mature democracies, and has both globally shared and regionally and nationally specific causes, and outcomes.

One of the issues within illiberal politics is the relationship between the law and the individual. Since the Second World War, international organizations and international law have played an important role in states' policymaking, including migration policy. However, this notion has been contested by a good number of states emphasizing their sovereignty in matters pertaining to internal affairs. Two opposing views exist. One supports a universalistic understanding and scope of international law, while the other promotes a selective view on international treaties and institutions. Discussion about sovereignty is often coupled with questions of national security. The latter has been actively used by authoritarian regimes as a tool in policy changes, but its importance has been underlined also in old democracies in recent times. (Heusala 2021) International obligations in migration policy, for instance, can be re-evaluated in situations which require heightened attention to perceived security challenges. National security can emerge on the political agenda in times when decision-making is particularly challenging because of external shocks. In such situations, information flows but it does not create a balanced reflection for the development of law or institutions. Internal political competition may increase over policy lines, and the importance of political consensus may be underlined (Beck 1992). Overall, a illiberal political agenda can tend to enhance the securitization of the policymaking and policy implementation process, which increases the powers of authorities and decreases the rights of citizens.

In illiberal politics, not only may laws themselves be illiberal by nature (i.e., limiting civil or universal human rights), but the implementation of laws may regularly infringe upon basic rights and freedoms of selected individuals and groups. In this way, illiberal governance practices refute the principle of equality before the law and can even exhibit a casual attitude towards the deterioration of institutional trust, as has been witnessed even in the case of the United States in more recent times. In particular, the principle of equality before the law can be overlooked in questions related to national security, when one of the key principles of the rule of law—that the government is subject to the law (Kahn 2006)—can be compromised.

Illiberalism may be promoted by separate phenomena and qualities, such as racism, elitism, or fanaticism, which find their way into political goals and policy processes, and sometimes join outwardly unrelated groups of people together in politics and government. Such driving forces of illiberalism are shared by different political systems and often have transnational features, while being anchored on local and national circumstances based on localized or national rationales. In the context of migration, illiberalism often leads to the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, the criminalization of irregular migration, and a disregard for the rights and wellbeing of migrants. This can result in the creation of hostile environments for migrants, where they are subjected to discrimination, abuse, and exploitation.

Migration policy and regulations have been a fiercely contested area in Western democracies, where emphasis on national security has resulted in the overall securitization of this policy area. Hadj-Abdou sees the inherent tension within liberal democracy as the main reason for the rise of illiberalism in an era of global mobility:

> while liberalism protects individual and minority rights to prevent a 'tyranny of the majority', democracy is essentially about the rule of the majority. Populist political entrepreneurs across Europe and beyond utilize this tension by putting an emphasis

> on majoritarianism claiming that liberalism, including migrant rights go against 'the will of majority'. (Hadj-Abdou 2021, 299)

For these reasons, the assumption that liberal regimes also implement liberal migration policies and are committed to respecting the rights of migrants has been questioned in recent research literature (Natter 2023). For example, in the REEE area, it has been suggested that Russian policies that violate the rights of migrants or exert 'legal violence' towards them may not always differ much from those of liberal democracies such as the United States or EU states (Schenk 2021, 304; Kubal 2013). Katherine Natter (2023) suggests that the focus on regime effect, which draws such binaries as authoritarianism–democracy or Global South–Global North, has failed to notice the generic and issue-specific process that can be found in different kinds of political systems. Therefore, illiberal politics are not exclusive to authoritarian regimes, as it is evident that illiberal tendencies can be identified across different political systems.

Analysing policies and critical decisions that seem to contradict liberal values reveals the multitude of ways that illiberalism penetrates national politics and influences policy choices. Faist (2018) notes that in migrant-receiving wealthy countries, migration control assumes a high priority, characterized by externalization through remote control and securitization in areas of origin and transit. The construction of physical barriers like 'Fortress Europe', where stringent border controls are implemented, has been scrutinized for its potential humanitarian impact, raising concerns about human rights and the treatment of migrants. Uygun (2023) has pointed out that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, founded in 2004, has aimed at securing the EU's external borders through collaboration with mostly non-democratic third countries, which creates concerns over conformity with the EU's principles and norms. In Finland, a member country of the EU, the government closed the borders with Russia in autumn 2023 (Valtioneuvosto 2023) in response to Moscow's allegedly intentional policy of bringing in refugees

and pushing them to the Finnish border. This underscores the complexity of migration management in liberal democracies. While some view this as a legitimate measure to protect national security and shield against Russia's potential weaponization of migration, others perceive it as a non-democratic, illiberal move that dehumanizes migrants and potentially denies asylum seekers their rights. This scenario highlights the delicate balance that liberal democracies must navigate between security concerns and upholding humanitarian values.

To describe the situation in which liberal democracies must follow contradictory immigration policies of 'open markets' and 'closed political communities', Hollifield (1992) introduced the term 'liberal paradox'. He argued that, on the one hand, the demand for labour in capitalist economies pushes states to pursue open and inclusive immigration policies. But on the other hand, states must adopt restrictive immigration policies because of nationalist demands from citizens and politicians' dependence on re-election. In other words, the beneficiaries of immigration are likely to favour the liberalization of immigration policies, while the wider electorate, or those who 'bear the costs of immigration', tend to argue for immigration restrictions. Thus, Freeman (1995) argued, politicians in turn are likely to cater to the interests of those who can lobby effectively. Put differently, while the expenses of immigration are dispersed, its benefits, such as the availability of cheap labour, are concentrated. Due to the dispersion of costs and the concentration of benefits, he argued, it is likely that employers (businesses that benefit from immigration), who can be quickly mobilized, will prevail over the rest of the population, who find it difficult to mobilize, as the carrier of diffused costs (Freeman 1995). Christian Joppke (1999) further contributed to these discussions by underlining the vital role that the national courts in Western countries have played in protecting the rights of immigrants. Compelled by their own legal and moral principles, liberal democracies, Joppke argued, coerce themselves through 'self-limited sovereignty' and remain immigrant-friendly against the wishes of their restriction-minded governments. Scholars

have also pointed to the limits of liberal states when politicians explicitly rely on liberal values while pursuing an anti-immigrant agenda, a concept defined as 'illiberal liberalism' (Adamson, Triadafilopoulus, and Zolberg 2011).

To differentiate between illiberal tendencies in authoritarian contexts and in liberal democracies, the policy process and implementation should be given attention. In consolidated democracies, the independent legal oversight of governmental decisions creates boundaries for decision-making practices and guides the outcome. Decisions can also be revisited because of changed public opinion and active interest representation, which influences political competition. In illiberal political systems, both the work of the judiciary and organized interest representation are heavily affected by the authoritarian legal and political culture, and the society does not have effective means to control the authorities' actions.

Exploring illiberalism in authoritarian regimes, such as the Russian Federation, and formally democratic regimes such as Hungary, requires paying nuanced attention to temporal and spatial circumstances and manifestations of illiberalism. When evaluating illiberal politics and their outcomes in the REEE area, the resilience of Soviet legacies should be given adequate attention as one explanation for the rise of illiberal politics. This is especially significant in an understanding of why globalization, and its radical neoliberal form in the 1990s Russian Federation, have been met with illiberal political responses that resonate well in the minds of the public born and raised during the socialist period. The survival of illiberal politics and practices may resemble 'authoritarian resilience' (Nathan 2003; Hess 2013; Whitehead 2016), a term used to analyse the persistence of authoritarian regimes against the internal or external pressures for change. There are major national variations in the way that the former socialist countries in the REEE region have evolved in terms of eradication of the past regime. However, we see that post-socialist countries in REEE share, to varying degrees, a common historical legacy regarding the main features of this governance style, which

is reflected in the strengthening of illiberalism in the region. This is not the same as seeing the socialist legacy as dominating; rather, it is something that may contribute to the re-emergence or intensification of illiberalism in this region.

The administrative and political legacy of the socialist regime resembles the concept of 'natural state', defined by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2006), where the central government uses limited access order to hold the elite together and secure societal order. In the REEE, the socialist past included limitations on free organization and access to commerce and trade, as well as the controlling of violence or oppositional movements through elite privileges. The personal understanding and experience which people have from the socialist era, as well as the structural developments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, impact the actual national illiberal agendas in different countries of the REEE. For instance, Gel'man has introducing the term 'bad governance' to describe an agency-driven—or elite-centred—political culture in the current Russian Federation, where the power vertical consists of elite privileges, corruptive power brokering, and policies which fluctuate between technocratic and more inclusive effectiveness criteria (Gel'man 2022).

In the socialist REEE, the law was an instrument for the elite, rather than a causeway (Kahn 2006) to wider legal protection and institutional trust. This strong legacy facilitates some of the key elements of illiberal politics in the REEE, which typically put emphasis on sovereignty, cultural cohesion, and uniqueness in connection with a selective or confrontational view of international norms and the functioning of political institutions and policymaking, all of which may accelerate the securitization of the policymaking cycle (i.e., the prioritization of national security as an overarching policy framework). Illiberalism in the REEE questions or denies liberal democracy's superiority as a model that can be imported to new societies without major national variations. For instance, Russian leaders have stated that Russia's version of government is 'sovereign democracy', including such elements as a strong power vertical.

The law as such is an important tool in the illiberal political agenda. But in the post-socialist context, the effects pushed forward by legal changes are still compounded by challenges linked to the third principle of the rule of law, namely a society's ability to enforce the supremacy of the law (Kahn 2006). In the REEE, these qualities are aggravated by long-standing practices, such as networks and informality, as well as administrative legacies of the REEE, which in many countries of the region contribute to the recycling of corruption and weak institutions and a lack of strong channels of interest representation. The outcome of successful illiberal politics and policymaking, in such a context, can result in an effective limitation or erosion of political and civil rights, electoral procedures, checks and balances (i.e., accountability), and overall constitutional stability in state–society relations. This impacts the image which people have of the state and its role in their lives, as well as their willingness to actively resist changes. Such a political culture may also involve the illiberal paradox in which situational analysis and negotiations inside the political-economic elite effectively guide migration policies while public and organized interest representation is challenging or impossible. In addition, even 'modern' legislation that seeks to consider different societal virtues in a more comprehensive manner suffers from the society's inability to enforce the accountability of the government in the implementation of legislation.

In addition to the legacy of the socialist system, we consider that illiberal states in the REEE depend on globalized markets and the shadow economy, which form the structures within which political decisions are made. Thus, an assessment of illiberal politics should consider the effects of globalization, which has diluted the significance of national borders both economically and culturally and brought about the drastic economic transition policies of the 1990s and a foreign policy backlash against Western influence. In the REEE, globalized economic and institutional competition has led not only to economic growth but also to elitist economic policies, including oligarchic power concentration and neoliberal markets, combined with a selective nationalistic agenda

and a heightened sense of outside risks, requiring securitization. Whether illiberalism is the root cause or rather the outcome of these structural features most likely depends on the situation and question at hand. Illiberalism can be both a reason behind and an outcome of various challenges related to inequality, political division, informality in government, or erosion of societal rules.

Migration in the REEE Area

Although global migration in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe is a geographically versatile and historically long process, in this edited volume we direct our attention to the recent interplay among the countries of this region which was shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The REEE region has experienced significant economic and political crises in the past few decades, which have resulted in a complex set of factors that shape migration patterns. In addition to the dramatic change from one political and economic system to another in the 1990s, the REEE countries have experienced similar vulnerabilities linked to the consequences of globalization that other parts of the world have seen.

As Müller (2018, 735–736) notes, the Global East contains much diversity in terms of economic situation, but in general it is too poor to belong to the global North and too rich to be considered a part of the Global South. Consequently, the Global East, whether we are talking about such areas as Eastern Europe or even such poorer areas as Central Asia, is usually not included in discussions about the need for emancipation in the Global South (Müller 2018, 738–739). Rising socioeconomic inequality, rapid cultural changes, and transnational security threats (whether real or perceived risks) have met with diverse and inconsistent reactions in REEE. The ex-socialist EU member countries are in many ways privileged in the global context, but in Europe they can still be considered less developed. The former socialist REEE does not neatly fit into the dichotomies of colonizers and colonies, aggressors and victims, as some countries in the region can be considered both. Racism against migrants is rampant in many Eastern

European countries, while discriminatory stereotypes of Eastern Europeans persist in many Western European countries (Krivonos 2023; Kalmar 2023). Thus, it is important to pay attention to flexible and relational hierarchies and exclusions (Krivonos 2023, 2–3).

Scholarly research emphasizes the importance of considering several key elements concurrently. Gerschewski (2013) has introduced the concept of 'authoritarian pillars of stabilization', shedding light on how autocratic states maintain stability amid global changes. This notion underscores the strategies of legitimation, repression, and co-optation employed by autocratic regimes to navigate the challenges posed by globalization. In tandem, Collyer and King (2015) highlight the significance of 'state controls of transnational space', emphasizing the role of governments in regulating the transnational flow of people and ideas. Diaspora politics has emerged as a notable channel for political voice. Scholars such as Burgess (2012), Caramani and Grotz (2015), and Gamlen (2008) underscore the political agency wielded by diaspora communities. These communities serve as influential actors in shaping and expressing political perspectives, contributing to the landscape of regional politics.

The year 1991 set in motion a vast-scale migration process within and from the REEE. The post-socialist space went from eight to twenty-eight countries, and an estimated 46 million people resided outside their country of birth (Heleniak 2017). Since then, a regional migration system has been formed within the former Soviet republics in which the main centres are Russia and Kazakhstan (Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020). The main flow has been to Russia, to which 8.4 million people immigrated between 1991 and 2000 (Abashin 2017; Karachurina 2012). Within two decades, almost 12 million immigrants, mostly from the former Soviet republics, moved to Russia to live there permanently, and almost the same number, approximately 11 million, of foreign nationals have been found to reside in Russia every year, most of whom are circular migrants (Abashin 2017). Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh contend that in the

Transcaucasia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, the peak of the population outflow in the 1990s was caused by armed conflicts, while in Central Asia it was caused by economic problems and discriminatory laws. Between 1992 and 2017, 2.2 million people emigrated from Kazakhstan, 1.6 million from Uzbekistan, and approximately 800,000 from Kyrgyzstan (Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020).

Scholars have for years analysed from various disciplinary perspectives the development of migration policies, the main administrative hurdles, legal uncertainty, the often abusive treatment of migrants, and their tactics for navigating the Russian administrative landscape (e.g. Abashin 2017; Urinboyev 2017, 2020; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022; Schenk 2018; Reeves 2019). Researchers have also discussed the effect of the Russian hybrid regime (Urinboyev 2020) and Soviet legacies (Heusala 2018: Light 2010) on the implementation of migration policies. The interdependence created by post-socialist migration has been most prominent between Russia and Central Asian countries. This region has a semi-official transnational labour market, which has been essential for several Russian industrial and commercial sectors while relying largely on globalized shadow economy (e.g., Heusala and Aitamurto 2017). The shadow economy connects questions of globalized economic competitiveness involving huge interests inside the Russian market with the internal security and foreign policy goals of a regional security complex (Buzan 1991) in Central Asia (Heusala 2017).

Today, the REEE region remains an important hub for migration (e.g. Ioffe 2020), with significant implications for both the societies in the region and migrants themselves. Russia continues to be among the top countries in the world for both immigration and emigration, with over ten million foreign workers coming to the country and millions of Russians departing on either a temporary or a permanent basis. In 2010 the outflow of remittances from Russia reached $21.4 billion, and in 2022 it was still $16.9 billion. In Kazakhstan, there were over 3.7 million migrants in 2022, almost 20 per cent of the population, and in Ukraine the number

of migrants in 2021 reached 5 million, nearly 11.5 per cent of the population (IOM 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted regular patterns of mobilities in the region, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing their home and hundreds of thousands of other migrant workers reconsidering their choice of destination.

Apart from Russia, the increase in resident population due to migration was observed in Belarus for almost the entire period of 1992–2017, when immigration exceeded 300,000 people. In Russia and Belarus, the countries with a comparatively better economic situation and low fertility among the former Eurasian Soviet republics, the population of working age declined but the demand for labour increased. In Kazakhstan, the growth in jobs outpaced demographic growth. The demand for labour in these countries was met partially by permanent and temporary migrants (Denisenko, Mkrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020), creating a pattern of circular migration between Russia and Central Asia.

Djankov's (2016) analysis shows that in Eastern Europe, the working-age population shrank by around 10 million people between 1990 and 2015 due to low birth rates and increased emigration. Labour migration within Eastern Europe has followed the economic growth in the region and also increased significantly after the EU enlargement to the east in 2004 and 2007. In 2004, about two million citizens from Eastern Europe resided in the EU. During the migration peak in 2007, 1 per cent of East European citizens moved to Western and Southern Europe. The lifting of labour restrictions in 2014 for Bulgarians and Romanians in nine European Union countries, including Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, prompted a new emigration wave. In 2016, GDP per capita in the migration-receiving countries Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia was 80 per cent of the EU average, and labour migration inflows came mostly from Ukraine and parts of the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, Bulgaria and Romania continued to be sending countries. By 2016, 6.3 million East Europeans resided in other EU states (Djankov 2016). Poland–Germany migration was boosted by the German–Polish bilateral agreement at the beginning of the 1990s which allowed

Polish citizens to engage in legal seasonal employment for three months in specific sectors of the German economy (Dietz and Kaczmarczyk 2008). From 2004 to 2007, after Poland's EU accession, a similar increase in population movements from Poland to the UK could be observed (Van Mol and de Volk 2016, 44).

In Ukraine, the initial influx of new residents in the early 1990s was replaced by an outflow beginning from 1994, as the demand for labour declined faster than the working-age population (Denisenko, Mkrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020). Since Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine began in 2022, the question of the integration of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees into their new places of temporary or even permanent residence has continued to shift the socio-political landscape of many European societies. Forced migration drastically challenges the resilience of receiving communities and societies and may increase the international political leverage of the illiberal aggressor state. These developments demonstrate in the most extreme way the interplay of illiberal politics and migration.

Our Cases

As we investigate the link between illiberalism and global migration in the REEE area, our ambition is two-fold. Our starting point here is that migration can have a significant impact on illiberal practices by contributing to political polarization, the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, the spread of xenophobia and discrimination, and economic competition. The illiberal answer to these challenges is typically the securitization of the policymaking and policy implementation process. Migration may also be used to strengthen elite consolidation through liberal labour market policies or to sustain societal stability through the export of surplus labour. At the same time, migration processes can challenge authoritarianism and illiberal political goals by fostering diversity, networking, democracy promotion, and political empowerment.

The focus of this edited volume, then, is less on migration as such and more on the impact that global migration in its various

forms, as analysed by our authors, has on the practices and political goals linked to illiberalism in the REEE. It is our view that both the scholarly community which studies the REEE and policymakers within and outside of this region should understand these complex relationships in order to examine and advance the rights and wellbeing of migrants in the face of rising illiberalism and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Our starting point is that illiberalism should be seen as a collection of beliefs and values, and of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation. In the REEE area, the most visible features in this regard have to do with a selective and confrontational view of international norms and the functioning of political institutions and securitization of policymaking. These processes often happen over a longer period and involve a complex set of legal and administrative decisions.

Migration can create a crossroad moment that opens new possibilities to strengthen illiberal regimes, as examined by Katalin Miklóssy. Her chapter (Chapter 2) explores why migration offered flawed democracies the means to strengthen their own path of illiberal development and focuses on the dramatic changes in the politics and rhetoric between 2015 and 2022, due to Russia's war in Ukraine. In her analysis, the political and narrative consequences of the European migration crisis in 2015, the Polish–Lithuanian border crisis in 2021, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022 are discussed by way of spatial and temporal comparison. Her core argument is that while illiberal regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis allows political elites to seize the moment and gain geopolitical elbow room. Her analysis shows that the crisis talk addressing migration that emerged in the European political discourse in 2015 made a big difference for European illiberal politics. It created the opportunity and the rhetorical means to invent a metanarrative that contributed to legitimizing the illiberal argument. Taking advantage of 'crises' helped to redefine the illiberal narrative and its advocates' international leverage and increase their impact. Miklóssy

calls the international circulation and spread of illiberal ideas in the European context the 'liberal paradox'.

Song Ha Joo (Chapter 3) examines why some autocratic regimes adopt more anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies than others. She notes that most existing literature on the politics of immigration focuses on liberal democracies, despite large-scale immigration to illiberal societies. Joo's research compares the immigration policies of Russia and Kazakhstan and shows how different regime dynamics of illiberalism can shape immigration policies differently. Russia has actively adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, whereas Kazakhstan has been more lenient towards undocumented immigrants. Joo argues that such differences arise from varying pressures from the electorate. In Russia, Putin and his United Russia party have faced significant pressure from anti-immigrant citizens and political opponents, leading to their adoption of selective anti-immigrant policies. On the other hand, Kazakhstan's regime has emphasized inter-ethnic harmony and is closer to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism, leading to its more relaxed approach to undocumented immigrants.

Song Ha Joo's conclusions show the complexities of authoritarian political goals in migration policy, leading to important further questions regarding the overriding interests of political elites in different types of authoritarian regime. The case of Russia shows that while the government has used measures considered to be restrictive, it has also tried to systematize its migration policy to create more regulatory and administrative predictability and to foster growth in the Russian economy. As we stated earlier, globalized economic and institutional competition has led not only to economic growth but also to elitist economic policies, including neoliberal markets combined with selective nationalistic agendas pushed forward in legislation. Thus, it can be argued, migration from Central Asia has been an arena for liberalized labour policy in such post-Soviet structures. The question remains of whether illiberalism is the root cause or rather the outcome of such structural factors. Illiberal political goals may be promoted by separate qualities such as racism and elitism, which find their way into

policy processes and join unrelated interest groups together in government.

Julia Glathe's chapter (Chapter 4) is connected to Joo's arguments, as it challenges the dominant illiberalism framework used to analyse Russian migration policy, which mostly sees it as a resource in the elite's informal patronage networks, and instead explores the underlying factors driving illiberalism in Russia. While most migration scholarship characterizes Russia's response to immigration as contradictory and reflective of an authoritarian, patrimonial, and populist state, Glathe argues that Russian migration policy is linked to broader problems and conflicts of post-socialist change. By analysing the Russian expert discourse on labour migration, Glathe demonstrates how context-specific constructions of migration are embedded in global power regimes and contends that the competing political projects of labour migration reflect a society renegotiating its post-socialist coordinates in economic, cultural, and global terms.

One of the crucial fields for maintaining illiberal regimes is managing elections with different tools and policy approaches. In Chapter 5, Dmitry Kurnosov analyses the legal regulation of elections in Russia from the perspective of migration. He notes that the regime uses several methods to misuse the system, discriminating against some and favouring others. In consequence, some groups—immigrants and internal migrants in particular—are 'othered' and seen as easy prey in manipulating elections. This can be done by preventing voting by making it extremely difficult, pressuring others to vote according to the wishes of the regime, or making the voting process easy for forgers to subvert. Kurnosov argues that this 'othering' shapes popular perceptions of election integrity and limits even the existing legal channels of democratic empowerment for migrants in the Russian Federation. As was mentioned earlier, authoritarian governments are less dependent on public opinion and elections than strong democracies. However, it is also quite typical that they aim to conceal their opposition to democratic procedures and maintain at least an illusion of democratic decision-making. For example, Russia has earlier

offered migrants the opportunity to vote. At the same time, the intensification of authoritarianism can be seen in increasing restrictions on, for example, dual citizens.

Even though the members of political opposition can form a significant portion of diaspora communities, it important to remember that there also emigrants who support illiberal politics in their home country. This becomes especially evident if we look at diaspora politics in a wider framework. Transnational political activism has been made easier by new information technology. At the same time, there are debates over whether online political technology can be seen as an efficient or even a legitimate form of political activity. In Chapter 6, Ajar Chekirova investigates the online activity of the Kyrgyz diaspora and its impact on Kyrgyz politics and society. Her analysis distinguishes between horizontal and vertical forms of communication on different platforms that serve the varying needs and interests of the migrants. The societal and political activism within the Kyrgyz diaspora intensified particularly during the October 2020 revolution, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict in 2021–2022. These cases exemplify the potential of emigrant social media political participation to challenge an illiberal regime in times of crisis and to develop emigrant citizenship. However, Chekirova reminds us that the vulnerability of social media to manipulation and distortion by those in power underscores the challenges faced by online political participation as a tool for resistance against illiberalism.

The question with both the Russian and Kyrgyz diasporas is their potential to serve as a reserve for future nation-building. The answers most likely differ because of the different reasons behind migration. For economic migrants, temporary or circular migration may foster limited activism on singular concrete issues, while for war refugees fleeing authoritarianism and conscription the outcome may be a longer and even permanent exile outside of their homeland. Such migrant communities, if successfully integrated into their adopted societies, may over time exert considerable political pressure from outside through foreign policy initiatives and financing of opposition movements.

The confrontation between illiberalism and liberal democracy in the international relations field is examined by Joni Virkkunen, Kristina Silvan, and Minna Piipponen (Chapter 7), who analyse the instrumentalization of global migration by Russia and Belarus as a tool in international politics. The authors analyse the Arctic Route from Russia in 2015–2016 and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Poland border in 2021 to illustrate how illiberal authoritarian states use their borders and patterns of global migration in contemporary Europe. The authors argue that the 2015–2016 Arctic Route migration from Russia to Finland and the migration episode at the Belarus–Poland border are similar examples of coercive engineered migration (CEM) which make explicit the significance of instrumentalized migration, the nexus of migration with liberalism and illiberalism, and the potential that migration may have for autocratic and illiberal states to achieve foreign-political goals.

With or without voting rights, it is possible that diaspora communities may pose political challenges to illiberal regimes. Whether Russian emigrants are interested in impacting the political development of their home country, and able to do so, is asked by Margarita Zavadskaya, Emil Kamalov, and Ivetta Sergeeva in their chapter, based on extensive survey data (Chapter 8). Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian diasporas were usually relatively unpolitical and a significant part held some loyalties towards the Kremlin. However, as the chapter shows, new migrants have political attitudes, skills, level of trust, and economic resources which are significantly different to those of previous migrants and the Russian population. They are also more politically engaged, and willing to self-organize to create inclusive social spaces. Yet, as Zavadskaya, Kamalov, and Sergeeva note, the capacity of Russian migrants to influence politics in Russia depends on the political dynamics in their countries of destination, international sanctions, the internal features of anti-war communities, their professional ties to the Russian labour market, and possible transnational repression by the Russian state.

Anna-Liisa Heusala and Sherzod Eraliev's chapter examines the mutual impact of migration flows and illiberalism in Russia and Central Asia (Chapter 9). The focal claim of this chapter is that the war in Ukraine constitutes the ultimate manifestation of illiberalism which has developed in Russian domestic politics during the post-Soviet era. This internal development, regarding the way that laws, state organizations, and political decision-making have evolved, has radicalized foreign policy, and is also linked to broader globalized challenges of the post-socialist change. Labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has enabled an unofficial social contract between the Russian political elite and Russian companies. Affordable labour under the conditions of a shadow economy together with a low level of unionization have created a neoliberal economic area between Russia and Central Asia. Migrant-sending countries in Central Asia continue to rely on the social and political stability that circular migration has provided since the 1990s.

The migration crisis which was created first by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by Russia's war in Ukraine created new challenges for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, as the return of several hundred thousand migrants from Russia put pressure on their vulnerable, remittance-dependent economies. The resulting social dissent, driven by declining living standards and unemployment, was expected to exacerbate existing tensions and create new challenges for these regimes. Given these new challenges, it is unclear how governments in the region will respond. Labour migration and the evolution of current labour markets continue to be central to internal and foreign policy goals in the regional security of the REEE.

Our overall goal in this edited volume has been to understand how illiberal states manage migration to absorb resistance and how migration may impact the illiberal political agenda in these societies. The chapters also include investigations of how illiberalism shapes, influences, and enables states to take advantage of migration to secure and advance political goals, and how

migratory flows provide opportunities for and/or exert challenges to illiberal governance practices.

Heightened attention to external shocks and crises creates a momentum for securitization in different types of regime and intensifies existing illiberal attitudes in, for instance, migration policy. As we have argued, one of the main differences between authoritarian and democratic governments that design and implement illiberal policies and decisions is that authoritarian governments are less dependent on public opinion and elections than are democracies. The chapters presented here show how governance practices include the possibility of creating faster policy shifts and legislative changes. The policymaking process in illiberal contexts can be tailored to the case at hand more quickly than democratic processes involving multiparty representation and often several rounds of deliberations. In the REEE area, public support is also relevant for illiberal politics, but in many countries of this region, neither organized interest representation nor the independent legal oversight of decision-making and implementation influence politics effectively. On one hand, decision-making can be highly centralized; on the other, the accountability of bureaucrats can be weak. This sustains a situation where the legal protection of individual rights is case-dependent. The often-prevalent informal practices and corruption, partly linked to the socialist legacy, in the REEE enable, for instance, the instrumentalization of migration, as there is limited public control over the activities of authorities. In the REEE area, migration policy and management may recycle socialist-era institutional dysfunctions, as well as serving to uphold and strengthen globalized neoliberal authoritarianism.

Notes

1 In this book, the use of 'REEE' encompasses the broad spectrum of former socialist countries within Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. When discussing specific parts of this broad area, such as the post-Soviet space or Central and Eastern Europe, we explicitly mention these distinctions. Otherwise, our references to REEE should be understood to include the entire region of Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe.

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CHAPTER 2

Illiberal Advantages of Migration

Hungarian and Polish Narratives in Comparison

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Abstract

The chapter asks when migration carries a crossroad moment that opens a new horizon of possibilities to strengthen illiberal regimes. The study investigates what types of migration are framed discursively as 'crisis', which is closely connected to the means developed as crisis management. The core argument is that while these regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis represents a temporal juncture point that can expand geopolitical leverage. New elbow room for integrity is aimed at through innovative modus operandi that are rooted in illiberal regimes' capabilities to adapt to new circumstances. The main questions this chapter seeks to answer are (1) how this special window of opportunities occurs and (2) what the process is that leads to the revision of traditional political means and the

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invention of new strategy, designed to reaffirm the resilience of the regime.

Keywords: illiberalism, migration crisis, Hungary, Poland, Visegrad, crisis management

Introduction: Illiberal Instrumentalization of a Phenomenon

Ever since the summer of 2015, there has been an ongoing and rather fruitless European debate about finding stable solutions for immigration from Asia and Africa. The EU plans to build a more just system sharing the growing pressure on the Southern European countries bordering the Mediterranean reached a deadlock. In particular, the Visegrad states (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary) once again found unity in refusing stubbornly and consistently to accept any compulsory quota policy. This created a cleavage between Western and Eastern members of the European Union. During 2015 and 2016, Hungary and Poland became the loudest opponents of migration in the Visegrad region, hijacking the decision-making mechanism of the EU. Back in 2015, these countries were addressed as examples of lack of compassion, of being free riders on EU support, their communist past brought up to explain their attitudes. After less than a decade, in the European Parliament elections of 2024, opposition to migration became a mainstream narrative building up campaign agendas in most of the member states. It is an interesting question whether the Hungarian and Polish stance was contagious. In any case, they introduced a new discourse that openly challenged the liberal value system.

This chapter examines state-led responses to three migration processes, all framed as crises: the European migration crisis in 2015, the Polish–Lithuanian border crisis in 2021, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022.[1] Naming is placing. Naming an event as *crisis* elevates it out of the ordinary, disconnecting it from its original context and furnishing it with a special meaning. The reidentification with a new label is a trigger that draws further *extraordinary action* (Birey et al. 2019). As McConnel et al. (2017)

have pointed out, migration studies in the European context can be thematized around borders, crises, and power. These themes are interwoven, although the entry point of exploration differ. An ever-growing scholarly literature has discussed especially the 2015 migration crisis in the context of the European transformation (Börzel 2016; Dzenovska 2016) and in connection to the rise of populism and right-wing politics (Thorleifsson 2018; Bangstad, Bertelsen, and Henkel 2019), zooming in on the special cases of the xenophobic anti-refugee politics of Hungary and Poland (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016; Gozdziak and Márton 2018, 125–151; Klaus et al. 2018, 1–34; Karolewski and Benedikter 2018; Krasznai Kovács, Ramakhrishnan, and Thieme 2022).

This chapter explores why migration has offered *flawed democracies* the means to strengthen their own path of illiberal development (Cabada 2017, 75–87; *The Economist* 2016). The focus here is on the dramatic changes in politics and rhetoric between 2015 and 2022, due to the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. The core argument is that while illiberal regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis allows political elites to seize the moment and gain geopolitical elbow room. The main question to be answered is why and how migration became a *metanarrative* serving the ultimate purpose of the illiberal agenda. Metanarratives are overarching explanations that bind together previously unrelated and various stories, which are now reframed to be perceptible within a new core message within and directed to a particular society (Lyotard 1984).

By analysing legal sources, official state documents, public and parliamentary debates, and media references, the political and narrative consequences of two waves of mass migration, in 2015 and 2022, will be discussed. Methodologically, both spatial and temporal comparison will be carried out. Besides the previously mentioned two timeframes of migration, the study compares the Hungarian and Polish reactions to and perceptions of these different periods of migration. Hungary and Poland have often been discussed together based on similarities, as defined by Liubarskii (2000; cited in Krom 2021, 92), regarding their distinctive

quality (governance model), their regional location (East Central Europe), and simultaneous historical events.

From the comparative angle, the question is: what is more important regarding the political responses to such an international phenomenon as migration—the similarities in governance models or the divergences in the countries' positioning in the international arena?

This chapter first elaborates the link between illiberalism and migration, then it will discuss why migration in 2015 can be seen as a watershed in the emergence of a new narrative frame and how it is negotiated, regionally and in relation to the EU authorities. Turning then to events in 2021 and 2022, the changes in metanarrative will be presented.

Invention of Metanarrative for Illiberal Purposes

The profound narrative change of the Hungarian government can be dated to the summer of 2014, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that his country's ideal of development was illiberal democracy (Orbán 2014). The term 'illiberal democracy' had been introduced already by Fareed Zakaria (1997) and has been criticized ever since as an oxymoron, in contradiction with the Western understanding of democracy as inevitably including freedom of speech and assembly, media pluralism, and protection of minorities (Bozóki 2017, 459–490; Halmai 2019, 296–313). Hungary at the time of this revelation was already on a democratic downward curve, with erosion of the rule of law, centralization of power, and increasing control over the media and civil society. What the administration needed was a powerful and consistent message that would ensure the mobilization of the people, especially in times of elections. *Illiberalism*, however, was as abstract a concept as *democracy*—not conceivable for most ordinary folk, who would be unlikely to respond to fuzzy theoretical notions. Consequently, a simpler trigger was required that would stir up emotions with minimum effort but that would work as a charm

every time whenever its use was necessary. A metanarrative had to be invented.

Metanarratives have important added value. Besides becoming shared discourses through the help of invested political power, they also anchor values, beliefs, and behaviour patterns. As such, they offer a platform for the construction of identity for a community (Kaplan, Sheafer, and Shenhav 2022, 1552). In the Hungarian case, the core message around which the metanarrative was built was the idea of national integrity. Between 2011 and 2015, the Orbán regime increasingly started to use the buzzword of integrity against criticism it was attracting for the rule-of-law situation, but it was still an ineffective rhetorical means of dealing with the EU (Miklóssy 2023). What made a difference in the popular turn of narrative strategy was the realization of how the language describing mass migration changed in 2015 in Europe. A new political interpretation emerged that framed the flow of African and Middle Eastern asylum seekers and migrants as a 'crisis', requiring urgent management (Clayton 2015). Crisis speech became a more frequent part of the rhetoric over the years, and gradually it prevailed also in later waves of migration in 2021 and 2022 onwards.

This chapter claims that while anti-migration discourse helped to concretize the illiberal message, crisis talk was a central factor in launching this process because it opened a new horizon of narrative possibilities. It was a crossroad moment, i.e., a liminal point where previous choices were revisited, enabling a new direction. Crossroad moments often appear in crises when finding a feasible solution requires the evaluation of options, particularly when multiple crises overlap on multiple levels. Migration in the cases of Hungary and Poland simultaneously affected the countries' international relations, domestic power play, and regional alliances, parallel to increasing clashes with the EU over the rule of law. A crossroad creates a suitable 'state of exception' (Schmidt 2004 [1922], 1988 [1926]; Agamben 2005, 32–40, 74–88, 2021, 26–30, 82–85) overturning traditional hierarchical relations between

causes and effects: illegitimate legislative practices become legitimate, making it possible to overstep institutional boundaries.

Political elites framed public discourse embedded in the triangle of agency and spatial and temporal contexts. *Agency* refers to friends and foes, heroes and villains, connected to the phenomenon of migration. This included a blame game addressing the various agents that accelerated the migration 'crisis', like the EU, international refugee aid institutions, political parties, individual politicians, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This was juxtaposed against the 'real heroes' of the situation, who offered working solutions, such as the border guards, local authorities, the nationally minded political elites. References to *spatial context* mark the uniqueness of challenges or solutions in the regional space of the Visegrad countries. Addressing the *temporal context* emphasized the momentum to act in response to a mounting crisis. The triangle of these interpretations of migration reveals the underlying political change, and the profound contradiction between the advocated values of the EU and the emerging illiberal trend among its Visegrad member states.

Illiberalism, as Kauth and King (2020) point out, conceptually refers to ideology and practices. Whereas ideology is based on the logic of excluding certain groups from the ultimate community, political or rhetorical practices undermine democratic procedures. Since illiberal elites oppose cosmopolitan and globalist perspectives and defend the nationalist and localist angle (Scheppele 2018), for them the transnational movement of people offends the national space and challenges the idea of nationhood. Furthermore, migrants and refugees require an individual approach to evaluate their right to stay. Individualism runs counter to declared community principles of the illiberal agenda (Laruelle 2022). The religious background of migrants can offer a powerful discursive means through which to emphasize the importance of defending Christian roots as an element of the unity of a nation. In other words, illiberal regimes react to migration because it symbolizes, in a condensed form, those values that they particularly reject;

hence, a migration 'crisis' represents a crossroad moment that emphasizes agency in a temporal and spatial context.

Inventing a metanarrative that was capable of strengthening the illiberal grip was a strategy of resilience. It was an ability to adapt to exogenous stress that occurred, in our cases, in the form of migration and complex international pressure. Resilience is dependent on the transformative capacity to safeguard the main structures and values of the system (Olsson et al. 2015). The metanarrative therefore had to contain a warehouse of narrative elements that could be applied flexibly in any and every situation.

The migration topic became a central piece of the Hungarian and Polish metanarrative due to a crossroad moment. The next section will elaborate on why migration in 2015 offered such a moment for the purposes of consolidating the illiberal regime in Hungary and establishing one in Poland.

The Crossroad Moment in 2015

The East Central European countries had previous experiences of 'mass' migration in the 1990s, when they welcomed tens of thousands of refugees following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, but the phenomenon was not framed as a 'migration crisis'. These people were seen as 'neighbours', running from wars that were ravaging close to citizens' home in Hungary and felt in other Visegrad countries as well. Images of the brutalities were mediatized widely and frequently over nine years. Taking into consideration of this fairly recent past, the puzzling question arises: what was so different in 2015?

The year 2015 was a perfect one in which to construct a new rhetorical strategy, centred around the metanarrative of integrity and concretized by anti-migration discourse. On the one hand, East Central Europe, due to its communist past, consisted mostly of ethnically homogeneous societies, with little previous experience of African or Middle Eastern migrants. A large-scale inflow of such migrants within a few months came as a surprise for those countries that were situated on the Balkan route. Second,

after 9/11, the Islamist terrorist attacks in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden in early 2010s were widely discussed in the traditional and social media, building a solid ground for public attitudes.

The political landscape was also different in August 2015 when the massive rush of people through the Balkan route begun. The migration wave raised critical voices against German chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenskultur*. This concept referred to a mutual understanding between the German government and people about accepting refugees enthusiastically (see, e.g., Joffe 2015; Hamann and Karakayali 2016). As early as April 2015, the EU discussed in special meetings what could be done against human trafficking and the foreseeable rise in migration figures. A proposal for reforming the asylum system was presented, and internal solidarity and responsibility was called for (European Council 2015b; Schulz 2015).

Chancellor Merkel's Germany had acquired a leading role in the EU, so criticism of Merkel's proposals for reforming the asylum system turned eventually against the EU, not Germany. This slowly surfacing East Central European oppositional stance started to emerge after the 2008 financial crisis. Doubts about the rationality of EU solutions had begun to deepen, helping EU-critical parties to gain more seats in the European parliamentary elections in 2014 (European Parliament 2014). However, the mass migration in 2015 crystallized the growing urge to find different responses to those being formulated in EU policy. This opened up the crossroad moment, resulting in the introduction of a new narrative frame. It spatially emerged first in Hungary and circulated via the Visegrad Alliance to Poland, a growing European power, which became the chief advocate of an anti-migration stance alongside Hungary. From this East Central European area, the anti-migration narrative later started to spread, between 2016 and 2018, more widely in Europe because the new rhetorical strategy was successful in resisting EU migration policies and wrecking the compulsory quota system. Hungary and Poland set an example of how to do it. In addition, and as the ultimate but veiled

aim, the anti-migration narrative had a tremendous impact on the illiberal development in Hungary and Poland.

Hungary: Launching the Anti-Migration Narrative

The migration crisis intersected with the accelerating rule-of-law debate vis-à-vis Hungary. The Hungarian government had been repeatedly warned since 2011 about its increasing problems with the rule of law, but before 2015 it was still just a small, unimportant country creating minor headaches for the EU (Miklóssy 2023). The pan-European crisis in 2015 offered the Hungarian administration an opportunity to distract EU attention away from the country's democracy failures. While the emerging Hungarian anti-migration attitudes added human rights violations to the long list of democratic deficiency, the new proactive stand nevertheless generated growing international attention to Hungarian narratives.

The anti-immigration narrative was first tested in January 2015. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared in a primetime public TV broadcast that his government wanted to avoid creating minorities of significant size, with cultural characteristics different from those of the Hungarian community (Hungarian Public Television 2015). This interview referred to the march of the heads of state in Paris in solidarity over the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as a strong statement against terrorism. The narrative invention of Prime Minister Orbán's speech was the linking of Muslim immigration to terrorism, and the consistent use of 'migrants' instead of 'refugees'. By consciously blurring terminology, a transformed message was articulated that the arriving people did not deserve the right to protection. The new narrative aimed at an emotional transition: diminishing empathy with people running for their lives while focusing on an image of calculating and cunning people seeking better living standards.

The EU started to reflect on migration as early as April 2015 at a special summit of heads of state in Brussels, where common

responsibility and solidarity were underlined and an 'emergency relocation mechanism' was sketched out (European Commission 2015c). The escalating situation in war zones like Syria and Iraq, and the continuing violence in Afghanistan and Eritrea, increased migration considerably by summer 2015 (UNHCR 2015). By June, when it became obvious that the number of arrivals had started skyrocketing—having almost doubled within six months—the emphasis shifted to reinforcing external borders and helping border states to manage the quickly growing difficulties (European Council 2015a, 2015b).

In June, the Hungarian government announced a lockdown on the southern border and started to build a fence four metres high and over 175 km long (Kormányhatározat 1401/2015). This was the first such fence since the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989. Information spread fast among the migrants and increased their eagerness to get through the border before the fence was ready. This grew into a massive rush, putting pressure on decision-makers. According to Frontext data, between July and September almost 143,000 people entered Hungary, whereas in the previous quarter the number was less than 40,000—an increase from the previous year of 1,364 per cent (Frontext Report 2015). Tens of thousands of people were wandering from one place to another, trying to get through Hungary; many headed towards Budapest, aiming to find transportation to the West.

Authorities, however, let the situation escalate in downtown Budapest, where thousands of people were taken care of only by humanitarian volunteer groups (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016). The media headlines of the dreadful circumstances in one of the main railway stations of the capital arguably served two narrative aims. First, they visualized the Hungarian government's anti-migrant arguments by zooming in on the young male refugees and their religious background. They were framed as an *aggressive army of Muslim men* threatening Christian Europe, especially women—and this image became an important narrative asset in both domestic and international arenas (Godziak and Márton 2018). The other aim was to utilize the extensive media

attention about the thousands of people who were left consciously unattended, piling up around the railway station waiting to be transported to the West (*New York Times* 2015). The image of human misery would affect the Western public emotionally and put pressure on German and Austrian politicians to open their borders.

Repositioning Hungary in the International Arena by Blame Game

The Hungarian government turned to the EU for assistance and money but found the EU process slow and inefficient—and so, the blame game started. The blame game is always an important polarizing narrative. On the one hand, it underlines the juxtaposition between friends and foes, but its ultimate message in this case, on the other hand, was that the situation was not by any means the Hungarian leadership's fault. Being a victim of circumstances and of international pressure became a constant and central element of the metanarrative.

From the Hungarian point of view, the main problem was caused by the Dublin Regulation, according to which refugees were supposed to be registered in the first EU country they entered (EUR-Lex, Dublin II Regulation). The Hungarian prime minister consulted other heads of state at the July EU meeting regarding whether the Hungarian authorities should still respect the Schengen and Dublin agreements or just establish a corridor through Hungary towards the West, which would nullify all previous agreements (*Spiegel International* 2016). The Hungarian government also saw Greece as responsible for the Balkan route and wanted Athens to do more to handle the problem. Later in September at an EU summit, Orbán bluntly suggested that 'if the Greeks are not able to defend their own borders, we should ask kindly, because Greece is a sovereign country, let the other countries of the EU defend the Greek border' (Euronews 2015).

Greece was not the only country drawn into collision with Hungary. After Hungary blocked entrance with the fence,

migrants changed their major route towards Croatia and started to enter Hungary from there. The Croatian PM Zoran Milanović indirectly criticized Hungary for closing borders and declared in September that his country was unable to handle mass migration and would not let migrants stay in Croatia—but would assist with their transfer to Hungary and Slovenia by trains and buses (The Government of the Republic of Croatia 2015). The Hungarian authorities were furious, seeing the Croatian action as outsourcing the problem to neighbouring countries. Antal Rogán, head of the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, stated on national radio that Hungary could block Croatia's accession to the EU's Schengen zone (Index 2015).

Disappointment and frustration with the situation were expressed in the EU and the debate became heated (Juncker 2015). In early September, Angela Merkel suggested that a quota system be implemented across the EU to share the burden more evenly. She called for solidarity and accepted refugees who wanted to continue to Germany from Hungary. Orbán did not hesitate to lead a full-frontal narrative attack on Merkel, taking advantage of the differences within her governing CDU–CSU coalition. He accused Merkel of 'moral imperialism' and underlined that the Hungarian administration did 'not see the world through German eyes' (Werkhäuser 2015). The Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and its leader, Bavarian PM Horst Seehofer, sympathized with Orbán's firm stand against the massive influx of refugees to Germany, advocated by Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Seehofer supported Orbán's proposal on stricter control of the EU's external borders and distinguishing between refugees and economic migrants.

Orbán presented himself as a champion of European law, especially of the Dublin Treaty, and suggested that the whole world should be involved in handling the migration crisis. In a meeting in Bavaria in September, addressing the German public, Orbán underlined that the Hungarian fence protected Bavaria (DW News 2015b). The apparent breach between the German governing parties was widely covered in the media, creating pressure on

Merkel. Thus, Merkel changed strategy a couple of months later, making a deal with Türkiye to dam migration from the Middle East (Amann et al. 2015). Blaming Merkel bluntly for the refugee crisis was a highly unexpected act given that Orbán's Fidesz party was in the same European People's Party group in the European Parliament and Germany was Hungary's biggest trade partner and main investor. As Orbán acknowledged in February 2015 during a meeting with Merkel, 6,000 German companies worked in Hungary, providing 300,000 jobs, and 25 per cent of foreign investments were from Germany, amounting to €6 billion since 2010 (Orbán 2015).

Yet not only did Orbán oppose the united EU policies; he also launched an offensive to change the course of Europe: his plan was to list all of the secure transit countries to Europe, to persuade Greece to hand over its border control to EU forces, and to create a global contingent system to share the burden of migration (Hungarian Public Media Company 2015; Joób 2015). He proposed this plan at the EU summit in September and immediately received Europe-wide publicity that increased the significance of a small country like Hungary (France24 2015; Euronews 2015). Aligned with the growing international interest, Orbán added a new narrative element, emphasizing his own image and role: the freedom fighter PM, who saves his country not only from migrants but also from EU dictates and safeguards Europe from Islamization. This was not only an effective narrative: it also strengthened his personal myth of the ever-so-productive and stubbornly independent leader. This narrative played a part in cementing Viktor Orbán's power position as the sole figurehead of illiberal Hungary.

Regional Alliance: Towards a Common Master Narrative

The master narrative, Orbán standing firmly alone against major EU countries, earned visibility but also negative attention for his country. For support, the Hungarian leadership turned to old allies in the neighbourhood. The Visegrad governments unanimously

refused Merkel's proposal on the compulsory quota mechanism, which stirred up emotions in the West, underlying the East–West divide. Tensions grew especially in the leaderships of the Mediterranean border countries, Italy, Spain, and Greece, where huge numbers of arriving people created enormous domestic pressure, requiring concrete acts of EU solidarity (DW News 2015a). In contrast and as a testimony to the lack of empathy and fairness, a more consistent Eastern opposition was underway. The Visegrad countries, also known as the V4, began to organize frequent meetings during the summer of 2015. This strategy had been developed already in the late 1990s when group power proved efficient in negotiations over the conditions of EU integration. It became customary that before important EU summits, the Visegrad countries met to reach a common understanding on how to drive shared interests (Miklóssy 2020).

In 2015, such meetings had three main purposes. First, the threat of mandatory quotas forced the V4 group to ensure that it would withstand increasing EU pressure by representing the same view at every EU level. Second, the countries were aware that bluntly opposing the quota proposal would harm the V4 brand, so a constructive approach was required to solve the migration crisis. Third, reaching out to other dissatisfied countries, regions, or parties would ease the pressure on the V4 and strengthen their point of view.

Since its establishment in 1991, the Visegrad alliance maintained a circulating presidency, lasting 12 months (Visegrad Group 2023). The migration crisis happened during the Czech presidency. While each presidency had its own agenda regarding regional cooperation, the Czech government admitted that migration came to dominate the presidency period from July 2015 until June 2016. In the most heated phase (between September and December 2015), the V4 had one extraordinary summit of prime ministers, six meetings of ministers of foreign affairs, two of ministers of interior, and two of ministers of defence—all of them linked to the threat of migration. All of these meetings testified to

a broad consensus on migration policy and the rhetorical stages required to represent it at the EU level (Visegrad Group 2016a).

The narrative strategy was simple but effective. The alliance began to take advantage of the same tropes that the EU used in addressing the migration issues but turned them against criticism. So, to respond accusations that the V4 was lacking in solidarity with other countries, the group began to repeat the notion of 'voluntary solidarity'. They blamed the EU for the worsening East–West divide because of its unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue. To move the focus of the European debates, they emphasized, instead of quotas, the protection of external borders of the EU. To prove their constructiveness, they offered experts and technical equipment for the fight against human trafficking and to assist with asylum procedures in certain distant hotspots. According to the V4, the goal was 'to eventually cease the pull factors' of migration and give financial assistance to countries of transit and origin. In this respect, Hungary was unanimously supported by its fellow Visegrad states because it was considered a frontline country protecting Europe's Eastern borders. This was a reference to a shared historical-mythical narrative about standing on the walls of Europe saving the continent from barbaric attacks from the East and South (Humphreys 2016). The V4 demanded the fulfilment of legal obligations by all member states, referring particularly to an effective return policy (Visegrad Group 2015b). The irony of the situation was that the Eastern flank of the EU countries followed the Schengen agreement and the Dublin Treaty to the letter while the West overlooked the common rules. The V4 even called for a 'roadmap back to Schengen' (Visegrad Group 2016b).

It was obvious that the V4 needed strategic partners to succeed in opposing greater powers with a decisive influence on European policy, such as Germany and France. So the Visegrad alliance began to lobby. During the most heated EU debates in September 2015, the ministers of foreign affairs presented the V4 agenda to the Luxembourg EU presidency and Germany (Visegrad Group 2015a). They reached out to strategic EU partners in the region,

such as Croatia (8 October), Latvia (21 October), Slovenia and Estonia (October 23), and Austria (23–24 November). In addition, they met with the Western Balkan countries (12–13 November), through which they raised the significance of the Balkan migration route to the same level of concern as the Mediterranean or southern passage. The ministers of foreign affairs even produced an article entitled as 'We Offer You Our Helping Hand on the EU Path'. The deal was bluntly stated: Western Balkan countries were geographically important in tackling the migration crisis, in exchange for which the V4 promised support in furthering their integration to the EU. The document mentioned that the 'article was published in the main dailies in the Western Balkans' simultaneously with the Annual Country Reports of the European Commission, which did not give a flattering picture of the state of democracy in the Western Balkans and would therefore delay EU negotiations (Visegrad Group 2015d; European Commission 2015b). In other words, for the common cause of hindering EU solutions on migration, the V4 did not hesitate to challenge the EU stand on enlargement.

Another terror attack on 13 November 2015 in Paris, by Islamists who had come to France with refugee status (France24 2022), unleashed the anti-migration rhetoric, presented by the Hungarian PM particularly but firmly supported by other leading Visegrad politicians. Before the European Council meeting, the V4 countries released a joint statement declaring their sympathy with 'the French nation' and took the opportunity to urge the implementation of external border protection, detention hot spots, and the preservation of Schengen (Visegrad Group 2015c). To prevent any further discussion over compulsory distribution of refugees, in December 2015 the Slovak PM Robert Fico even issued a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice against mandatory quotas as a violation of the legitimacy of national parliaments. Two days later Hungary joined in filing a similar lawsuit (Court of Justice of the EU 2015).

The 2015 migration crisis and its aftermath taught the V4 that group effort made a difference in standing up to the EU, and this

lesson undoubtedly strengthened their inner cohesion. This was palpable at the summit organized by the Czech presidency celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Visegrad alliance (15 February 2016), where differences in migration policy were framed as 'emerging new dividing lines in Europe' (Visegrad Group 2016c). In addition, as another symbol of successful opposition to the EU, the Hungarian fence became a model followed elsewhere. In 2015 and 2016, fences were erected between Slovenia and Croatia, between Greece and North Macedonia, between Austria and Slovenia, around the harbour of Calais, and in Ceuta and Melilla.

Poland: Flexible Solidarity and the Hungarian Path

The lesson learned from 2015 was that European attention is directed at 'putting out immediate fires', which offers considerable leverage during acute crises. In the Polish parliamentary elections in October 2015, Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS) gained the majority—and the migration crisis that year bore relevance in the campaign. As early as 2011, Kaczyński had made it public that he admired Viktor Orbán's illiberal model of governance and intended to implement it eventually in Poland. Kaczyński claimed: 'Viktor Orbán gave us an example of how we can win. The day will come when we succeed, and we will have Budapest in Warsaw' (*Financial Times* 2016). The illiberal political change in Poland was dramatic because the new national conservative, right-wing powerholders were openly critical of the EU and allied closely with Hungary on every significant question, ranging from the rule of law and nationalism to African and Middle Eastern refugees.

Poland took over the Visegrad presidency in July 2016 and by September 2016 the crossroad moment was reappearing, now in Warsaw. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski introduced a new common narrative frame for the V4 'flexible solidarity'. Each EU member country was to participate in sharing the burdens of refugees according to their economic capabilities.

Those countries that had modest economic potential could contribute to the refugee effort by participating in humanitarian programmes and assisting in refugee camps, especially near to the war zones. The aim of presenting the idea of 'flexible solidarity' was to show constructiveness while hindering the new EU plan to fine those countries resisting responsibility for their share under the quota mechanism. This was translated as an institutionalization of compulsory solidarity between EU states and as such was unacceptable for the V4. So, the Polish leadership launched the 'Bratislava process', representing an ever-toughening line (Visegrad Group 2016b). By November 2016 the tone of the rhetoric had become agitated. The V4 ministers of the interior accused the EU of an inability to deal with migration and deepening divisions among the member states (Visegrad Group 2016d).

Poland was not situated on the Balkan route of migration, so the country was not 'targeted' by the mobility. What the leadership resisted was being dragged into the 'crisis' by the suggested mandatory quota system. The Polish initiative of 'flexible solidarity', played out the central and cherished memory piece of Polish history, the resistance movement of Solidarity (Pol. Solidarność) against the communist leadership and Soviet overlords. The new narrative of solidarity was a reminder for the West of Poland's traditions, indicating that Western accusations that the country lacked solidarity were unfounded. The new narrative also challenged the 'refugees welcome' type of transnational solidarity by representing a competing interpretation (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Oikonomakis 2018; Wrzosek 2016). The official anti-migration line was supported by mushrooming illiberal civic movements and nationalist organizations that counterbalanced the pro-refugee NGOs (Ekiert, Kubik, and Wenzel 2017). This encouraged the government to elaborate further on the narrative content of solidarity; as Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz put it: 'Our solidarity rests upon strongly supporting Frontex' (cited in Gozdziak and Main 2020).

Poland and Hungary: Culmination of Crossroad Moments

The Polish influence grew considerably in the international arena during 2016. This gradually strengthening role was due to the consistent exploitation of anti-migration narratives. The Polish leadership started to coordinate the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism. This initiative was framed as a 'constructive' V4 alternative, offering a 'result-oriented solution' and 'comprehensive approach' to migration policy, in contrast to the 'ad hoc' EU actions (Visegrad Group 2016d). The goal of the proposal was to move the balance of narrative strategy from responding to EU suggestions to become more proactive and more impactful. This was in line with Polish priorities, which the administration drove at the European level through the Visegrad alliance, particularly during the Polish presidency period of the V4. 'A strong voice in the EU' was aimed at strengthening the Polish positions in the EU, in order to shape its agenda (Visegrad Group 2016e). This was Poland's crossroad moment.

While the EU's attention was directed at finding solutions to the migration crisis during 2015 and 2016, the new power-holders in Poland introduced a new policy line, resembling the Hungarian one. PiS won the parliamentary elections in October 2015 and sped up legislation on the media, gender, and the Constitutional Court, launched holistic judicial reform—all within a year. In addition, Poland acquired a leading role within the V4 with remarkable levels of activity and initiatives on the migration agenda, all part of an underlying effort to take a central role in European politics that would better befit the size of the country and the significance it sought.

With the group support of the Visegrad countries and the PiS victory, Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime was not alone any more. These factors had a transformative influence on Hungarian behaviour. Because the V4 shared the Hungarian anti-migration ideas, and the Polish leadership showed political sympathy, Orbán

became bolder and was able to multiply daring political moves. Hungarian crossroad agency was intensified by the Polish lead.

In accordance with the Polish flexible solidarity initiative and to protest openly against EU plans to fine resisting countries, the Hungarian government organized a referendum (2 October 2016) to send a message that the Hungarian people stood behind the anti-migration policies. The question to be answered in the referendum was framed around the idea of sovereignty: 'Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?' (*Népszavazás* 2016). From the legal point of view, the referendum was unnecessary because the state was bound by international agreements, such as EU membership, that would override national legislation. Furthermore, in 2016 any law, even the Constitution, could have been altered without any referendum or discussion in parliament because the ruling Fidesz party had a supermajority. In addition, the Hungarian people experienced a year-long overenthusiastic anti-migrant campaign. It started with billboards in September 2015, continued by weekly speeches by leading politicians repeated in electronic and printed media, and accelerated during the summer of 2016 (Glied and Pap 2016). The propaganda around the referendum emphasized national security and that the government wanted to protect the citizens from 'foreign invasion', since the migrants were mostly young and aggressive men, potential terrorists. Yet, seemingly, people became weary of the massive campaign, and only 41 per cent of eligible voters cared to vote, although over 98 per cent of these favoured the government. The referendum was declared invalid (Nemzeti Választási Bizottság 150/2016).

There were three major consequences of the crossroad moment, when the Hungarian administration took a new turn in the summer of 2015, launching its anti-migration narrative, followed in a few months later by the Polish government. On the one hand, this move paid off by reinforcing illiberal power in both countries. The ruling parties, the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish PiS, were re-elected, Fidesz again acquiring a supermajority.[2]

Second, from a wider perspective, it can be argued that the V4 had undermined the compulsory quota policy of the EU by September 2017. After two years of the 2015 refugee crisis, only 28,000 people were redistributed, out of whom 16 went to Slovakia, 12 to the Czech Republic, and none to Hungary or Poland (Martin 2017). Third, and perhaps the most long-term consequence of all, was a paradigm shift. The national cause embedded in the sovereignty-seeking discourse of the V4 group brought attention to nationalist-conservative agendas emphasizing ethnicity, culture, and religion in the Eastern flank of the EU, but this was eventually echoed in rising state-centred nationalism and migration-critical trends in Western countries by 2020. This Western development can be seen in the growing support for the V4 initiatives that move the focus of migration policy to firmer border control and establishing refugee camps outside the EU. This paradigm shift played a vital role when the Polish–Belarusian border crisis began in the autumn of 2021.

Polish–Belarusian Border Crisis in 2021

By September 2020, the EU authorities were losing patience with the stubborn opposition of the V4 on migration policy. While the prime ministers changed in Poland (now Mateusz Morawiecki), Slovakia (Igor Matovič), and the Czech Republic (Andrej Babiš), their staunch objection to quotas remained the same. The EU Commission, however, insisted on a 'mandatory solidarity mechanism', according to which participation in sharing the burden would be a condition for EU funding, and refusal would result in an infringement procedure. Furthermore, the Commission would monitor member states' economic prosperity and population size annually and then decide the number of refugees each country must take in (Baczynska 2020). Hungary and Poland were under additional pressure due to the new rule-of-law mechanism, introduced in January 2021. It also relied on conditionality, regarding not only post-pandemic recovery funds but also the EU budget for the period of 2022–2027 (EUR-Lex Regulation 2020/2092).

Seemingly, the East–West debate was heating up, but suddenly a new migration crisis broke out and changed the underlying juxtaposition.

The Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka staged a migration flow as a response to the EU sanctions. These sanctions were issued in response to fraudulent presidential elections and drastic measures against the political opposition and civil society (Council of the EU 2020). Transporting migrants from Iraq across Belarusian territory to the borders of Lithuania and Poland was an attempt to inflict pressure on the EU and create internal conflict over migration. Already in June 2021, when hundreds of migrants began to arrive daily in the country, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielis Landsbergis called the situation 'hybrid warfare', where refugees were instrumentalized and called for EU assistance (Landsbergis 2021). But no aid was provided, and the situation accelerated rapidly until October, when the Polish–Belarusian border became a violent hotspot (Hebel and Reuter 2021; Bolliger, Popp, and Puhl 2021).

While Poland and Lithuania were still waiting for the EU to react in the mounting crisis, the Visegrad countries promptly offered their help to Poland. In June 2021, they agreed on military cooperation and commitment to a special Visegrad battle group, which could be utilized also in response to EU actions and would not be solely under NATO command (Visegrad Group 2021a). In July, the V4 repeated the old tactics involving other countries, to get more support for regional matters. The new V4+ also entailed Austria and Slovenia, both in sympathy with the illiberal administrations of Hungary and Poland. Taking advantage of the ongoing hybrid operation, the V4 stressed the urgency of fighting illegal migration and cross-border crime (Visegrad Group 2021b). This was an attempt to cement the regional anti-migration stand and keep EU attention on security discourse. The V4 also drove an initiative to reform the Schengen agreement to reintroduce inner border control, as a response to the new Schengen Strategy (EUR-Lex COM 2021, 277). Through this new strategy, the EU was trying to mediate between the divergent Eastern and Western positions.

On the one hand, the Commission agreed to invest in stricter external border control. On the other hand, it still required compulsory solidarity, but only in *migration management*. This was a considerable concession for the V4 and a flexible solution that could cover various activities, ranging through capacity building, operational support, and other engagement (European Commission 2020).

In the meantime, the Polish–Belarusian border situation became heated. The Polish authorities deployed around 15,000 military personnel, supported by additional forces from the border guards and police, using water cannon and pepper spray to hold back the migrants who were driven over the border by Belarusian troops. Poland declared a state of emergency in September and restricted access to the border area for journalists and refugee aid activists. Later, in October, Poland legalized the procedure of pushing back to Belarus those refugees who had succeeded in crossing the border (EUobserver 2021; BBC News 2021). While international criticism of human rights violations was increasing, Poland refused the Frontex forces—due to profound distrust in the EU organization and its possible hindering of the practice of pushing back. In contrast, the V4 supported the tough Polish actions and offered immediate combat assistance to help to protect the border (Szíjjártó 2021).

The conflict brought much international publicity to the PiS government, but seemingly in a completely new manner. While just a year earlier the EU had threatened Eastern members with conditionality if they did not change their attitude to quotas, in November 2021 the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declared that this was not a 'migration crisis' but a destabilizing manoeuvre by an authoritarian regime, and that it was vital to strengthen the external borders of the European Union (von der Leyen 2021a). She promised support for border management, for which the Commission tripled funds for Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (von der Leyen 2021b). For the V4, the change of emphasis meant that finally the EU had got their message: safeguarding the external borders from intruding migrants

was the most important guarantee of security. The response of the Commission to the border crisis was a confirmation of the post-2015 paradigm shift, launched by the consistent narrative of the Hungarian and Polish leaderships.

In the end, the crisis was neutralized by EU negotiations, and while the EU opposed building fences around Europe, the Polish administration ordered the construction of a steel wall 186 km long and 5.5 m high along the Belarus border, which was finished in July 2022. The firm Polish stand in the border conflict, and particularly its refusal of EU Frontex assistance, stirred up criticism in the EU, and more attention was directed to the rule-of-law violations in Poland. Yet Poland, relying on Hungarian support, maintained its illiberal line against all odds.

Ukraine 2022: Refugee Crisis

The war in Ukraine was another crossroad moment for Hungary and Poland. The choices they made created a rift between these countries and within the Visegrad alliance. The war brought the fragility of security to the fore, but the threats to national existence were interpreted differently in Budapest and Warsaw. Nevertheless, the war turned Hungarian and Polish refugee politics upside down, as both countries displayed a similar welcoming reaction to the people fleeing the atrocities. In this respect, the situation recalled the 1990s Yugoslav wars and the benign atmosphere towards *neighbouring refugees*.

Poland and Hungary, however, had different relations with Ukraine and Russia, and divergent national narratives fed on official memory discourses, where historical traumas played a special part. The widely advertised Polish solidarity with Ukraine was reminiscent of the selected memory pieces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Middle Ages, embracing Ukraine, and especially Western Ukraine as Polish territory. All of this unity was destroyed by the USSR after the Second World War. The current war resembles the Polish experiences of existential fear of expansionist Russia, which has relevance for the formulation

of Polish identity. Hungarian remembrance considered the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine a part of the ideal homeland that Hungary lost to Stalin (Miklóssy and Pierzynska 2019). The vital difference between these memory traditions is that Poland had begun to repatriate ethnic Poles from the lost territories after 2004 (Sendhardt 2017), while Hungary did not do the same with the Hungarian minority. When the war in Ukraine broke out in February 2022, the Hungarian minority there consisted of around 150,000 people. The Orbán government's neighbourhood policy has always depended on how a country dealt with the Hungarian minorities. Hence, when the Ukrainian government issued language laws, restricting the use of minority languages in education and local administration, it became a problem. In response Hungary opposed Ukraine´s membership of NATO, and bilateral relations quickly deteriorated as early as 2019.

Refugees were a different issue, on which both countries showed extraordinary solidarity. In both countries, there was massive work-related out-migration to the West, creating a lack of labour force on home markets (Klaus 2020). Hence, these countries started to rely on migrant workers coming from Ukraine. According to various evaluations, between 2018 and 2021 Ukrainians represented 88 per cent of all registered migrant workers on the Polish labour market (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022). In Hungary, the number of Ukrainian workers was much lower (in 2020 it was 13,410, 2 per cent), due to the language barrier, which is why many of those who did come had a Hungarian minority background (Pálos 2022; Nemzeti Foglalkoztatási Szolgálat 2020). This situation changed suddenly with the outbreak of the war. According to the UNHCR (2023), by April 2023, over 2.4 million Ukrainian refugees had entered Hungary and 10.6 million had come to Poland—although for temporary protection some 34,300 people registered in Hungary and 1.58 million in Poland. Comparing these numbers with the firm opposition to the EU mandatory quota back in 2015, the difference is astonishing. While these countries had a convergent migration policy, the war in Ukraine

altered their bilateral relations profoundly because of their diverging policy on Russia.

Poland had been a staunch proponent of EU sanctions on Russia since 2014, with anti-Russian attitudes uniting Polish political parties. Hungary, on the other hand, did not consider Russia a residual threat. For Hungary, 'security' historically referred to economic development that guaranteed the standard of living and thus the legitimacy of power. Russia was seen as a stronghold against uncontrolled immigration, and the Kremlin's concern about Russian minorities abroad echoed the national conservative Orbán administration's long-term strategic goal of minority protection (Országgyülési Határozat, 94/1998). Personal cordial relations with President Putin played a role in securing gas transfers, but even more importantly, Orbán was able to exploit the anti-Russian atmosphere prevailing in Western rhetoric (Orbán 2017; Szíjjártó 2017). The different Russia policy resulted in dissimilar recalibrations in the countries' EU strategies.

Since Poland was aligned with the official EU line on Russia, the PiS government earned new respect in the EU. The enormous voluntary share of Ukrainian refugees taken by Poland was positively noted (Krzysztoszek 2022b). Poland supported all EU sanction packages, and even called for a firmer line against Russia and more substantial military support to Ukraine (Krzysztoszek 2022a). In contrast, Hungary begun to block consensual decision-making and succeeded in watering down sanctions against Russia after June 2022 (Strupczewski 2022). Since the war fundamentally threatened the European security architecture, the differences in these countries' policy on Russia and Ukraine gradually started to influence general EU attitudes. Parallel with the fluctuating war in Ukraine, EU appreciation and annoyance translated into discussion over the rule of law in Hungary and Poland. As it turned out, Poland was rewarded by the approval of a €35 billion recovery fund early in June 2022, but this was withheld temporarily according to the rule-of-law mechanism (Liboreiro 2022). In contrast, EU discontent with the overall performance of Hungary could be seen in a delay in approving its recovery fund until the last minute

in December 2022, denying access to the funds based on the conditionality of the rule-of-law mechanism. The breach within the Visegrad alliance continued, due to the different Russia policies. As a result, by January 2023 Hungary stood alone.

This crossroad moment showed the significance of in-between spatiality. The different choices of Hungary and Poland originated from the different options embedded in the area between the Eastern and Western systems. Hungary, while taking advantage of the EU as a member state, openly showed affinity with the Russian model at a moment when tensions between the EU and Russia were heightened. Poland, in contrast, capitalized on the fact that the EU's short-term interests converged with Polish Russia policy. This does not mean that Poland changed its course and approach to the Western democratic model. The Polish elite just used the convergence of interest with the EU to boost the resilience of their illiberal regime.

Illiberalism and the Anti-Migration Narrative: Time, Space, and Agency

This chapter has investigated how three temporal migration events offered crossroad moments for regional actors, such as Hungary and Poland. A juncture in a particular time and space enabled the reinvention of agency. An illiberal regime opposes liberalism in general, but this has limited if any impact on liberal democracies. The crisis talk, addressing migration, that emerged in the European political discourse in 2015, however, made a big difference. It created the opportunity and the rhetorical means to invent a metanarrative that contributed to legitimizing the *illiberal argument*. Taking advantage of 'crises' helped countries to redefine the illiberal narrative and their international leverage and increased their impact. The international circulation of its ideas further reinforced the illiberal power; in other words, it strengthened regime resilience. This we can call the 'liberal paradox'.

The Hungarian leadership recognized the chance to expand the boundaries of agency and the narrative space by exploiting the

moment when the unity of the European community was weakened by migration challenges. In 2015, Hungary was still the sole declarable illiberal regime. It pushed a new process into motion by introducing the novel narrative of sovereignty for the Visegrad countries, through which the Hungarian leadership reached out for regional support. The difference between the other countries of the V4 and Hungary was that all except Hungary had only indirect experience of migration in 2015. To mobilize the Visegrad alliance against the 'compulsory solidarity' rhetoric of the EU was instrumental. The group support made the Hungarian agency bolder, and the growing international attention widened the audience receiving the anti-migration narrative. The increasing power of its argument lent an impression of Hungary being a 'bigger' country with a stronger illiberal cause that contributed to the changing of power in Poland. The new Polish administration sought a greater international role for itself, gaining new agency and more space by taking over the lead on anti-migration advocacy in 2016. In comparison, Hungary initiated a narrative that Poland, with a time gap, helped to nurture to a fuller size. The consequence of this collaboration was a profoundly weakening European narrative that, in the end, made concessions to the strengthening illiberal agency. By 2017, relying on the Visegrad Group's support, Poland and Hungary were able to water down the compulsory quota system.

By maintaining firm opposition with alternative proposals, their ideas spread across the EU, enhancing a paradigm shift in migration discourse. This could be seen particularly in the Belarusian border conflict in autumn 2021, when the Western human rights rhetoric gave way to border security discourse, redefining the mainstream narration. The EU authorities fully supported Polish actions to force the migrants back over the border. Temporarily, 2021 was a reaffirmation of the process that started in 2015. In that sense, it underlined the rising impact of an enhancing illiberal agency. Poland, however, was acquiring the undoubted leading regional role.

The war in Ukraine was a new crossroad moment that turned around the staunch anti-migration policy of the Hungarian and Polish governments. Suddenly, they welcomed millions of refugees from Ukraine without hesitation. In this case, migration was profoundly connected to European security, i.e., relations with Russia and Ukraine. On the other hand, this pointed to the immanent racist nature of previous 2015 and 2021 anti-migration narratives. For Poland and Hungary, African and Middle Eastern Muslim refugees and white Christian Ukrainian refugees were two entirely different stories.

The diverging Hungarian and Polish responses to Russia had decisive impact on how successful their chosen agency was in achieving more leverage at this juncture. As became evident, the Polish strategy coincided with the primary goals articulated by the EU and hence considerably strengthened Poland's European appreciation and international position, regardless of the fact that it was still an illiberal state. In contrast, due to its controversial choices, Hungary became increasingly isolated in the European arena, which decreased its political weight and influence. Ironically, due to the metanarrative of the legitimacy of the illiberal regime, invented in 2015, EU criticism of Hungary's path made illiberal power even stronger. The anti-migration stance launched by Hungary spread eventually across Europe, with the powerful side message of illiberalism, nationalism, and neoconservatism.

The advantages of a crossroad moment might seem unpredictable but basically the question is similar to that in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat what road to take, and the Cat's answer is 'That depends on where you want to go' (Castiglione 2007, 26). From the illiberal regimes' perspective, it is a chance to strengthen their grip on power to make their system sustainable. The only open question is how the selected strategy takes them to this primary goal. Furthermore, consecutive crossroad moments can blur the big picture; choosing between short-term and long-term strategies becomes more complex and increasingly difficult. This indicates that at any crossroad moment, a decision can diminish or even nullify previous suc-

cesses, because agency always depends on the cross-reading of the temporal and spatial context.

Notes

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2 Parliamentary elections were held in Hungary on 8 April 2018 and in Poland on 13 October 2019.

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CHAPTER 3

Why Politicize Immigration?

Elections and Anti-Immigrant Policy in Russia and Kazakhstan[1]

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Abstract

Under what circumstances do autocrats politicize immigration and adopt anti-immigration policy? Much of the existing literature focuses on the politics of immigration in liberal democracies, despite the presence of large-scale immigration to illiberal societies. This research shows how different electoral dynamics can shape the politicization of immigration and policies distinctly, focusing on Russia and Kazakhstan. The ruling regime in Russia has actively adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies whereas Kazakhstan has turned a blind eye to undocumented immigrants. I argue that such differences stem from the variation in pressures from the electorate. Putin and his United Russia party are subjected to significant pressure imposed by anti-immigrant citizens and political opponents. By contrast, Kazakhstan has been closer

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to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism, with the regime's emphasis on inter-ethnic harmony. This research is based on analysis of original qualitative data, including interviews with government officials, NGOs, local scholars, and migrants, gathered from 11 months of fieldwork in the two countries in 2015–2017.

Keywords: illiberalism, politicization of immigration, anti-immigration, elections, Russia, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Contrary to conventional wisdom that people move to developed democracies, remarkably, large-scale immigration occurs in illiberal states too. In 2020, authoritarian regimes ruled half of the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries in the world.[2] Illiberal states show a significant variation in the degree of the politicization of immigration and immigration restrictions. Nonetheless, relatively little is known about the politics of immigration in illiberal settings, as the comparative scholarship on immigration politics has focused primarily on Western liberal democracies (Boucher and Gest 2018, 22–24). This is an important research gap, given the significant effects of immigration on the politics and economies of many autocracies and the implications of immigration regulations for migrants and migration flows (Massey 1999; Norman 2021).

In this chapter, I show how different regime dynamics can affect autocrats' politicization of immigration and immigration policies. I argue that the level of electoral competition can be a key factor in explaining the politicization of immigration and the subsequent anti-immigrant policies in illiberal states. When there is a high degree of electoral competition, autocrats are tempted to adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies because the mobilization of anti-out-group sentiment can reinforce the unity of the in-group and form a popular base of support for the ruling regime. These effects begin prior to an election but continue afterwards as a way of demobilizing potential threats that might arise subsequently. Thus, electoral competition can lead to immigration restrictions in electoral authoritarian regimes.

The chapter develops this argument by conducting comparative case studies on two illiberal states, Russia and Kazakhstan, in the 2010s. They are major immigrant-receiving autocracies: in 2020, in terms of the size of the foreign-born population, Russia and Kazakhstan ranked fourth and 15th in the world, respectively (Migration Policy Institute 2020). Given the scale and political significance of low-skill immigration in Russia, Kazakhstan, and many other countries (Peters 2017), this chapter focuses on low-skill immigration. Russia has politicized immigration and imposed tight immigration restrictions since the beginning of the 2010s. In contrast, Kazakhstan has turned a blind eye towards immigration, adopting relatively open immigration policies. The analysis in this research shows that variation in the levels of electoral competition has facilitated such differences in their policies. When Vladimir Putin ran for president again in 2011–2012, his ruling regime faced electoral competition. To mobilize popular support, Putin politicized immigration issues and enacted immigration restrictions before and after the elections. In Kazakhstan, due to the high level of popular support for the regime and the absence of electoral competition, the ruling regime did not need to resort to anti-immigrant rhetoric or policy.

By demonstrating the role of electoral factors, this research sheds new light on a theoretical framework for immigration policymaking in illiberal societies. Assuming that autocrats are insulated from popular pressures, the extant theoretical work on authoritarian immigration politics has dismissed the role of electoral factors while highlighting that of other factors such as economic conditions, bureaucratic politics, and international pressures (Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Mirilovic 2010; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Schenk 2018; Shin 2017). This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the importance of elections for policy in autocracies (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015). Previous studies on democratic states show that elections affect immigration policy through partisanship, the size of immigrants' co-ethnic vote, and the preferences of swing voters (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Money 1999; Wong

2015). In illiberal settings, the influence of such factors is nearly absent, since elections are neither free nor fair. Still, electoral factors influence the politicization of immigration and immigration policy through a distinct mechanism—autocrats striving to maintain overwhelming popularity. This chapter does not contend that electoral factors alone can explain immigration policies. The findings, however, provide building blocks for models of immigration policy in illiberal states.

Previous Research

Existing studies on immigration have focused predominantly on liberal democracies and emphasized the role of national identity and xenophobia (Brubaker 1992; Zolberg 2006), economic conditions (Meyers 2004), welfare benefits (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007), organized interests (Freeman 1995; Peters 2017), political parties (Perlmutter 1996; Wong 2015), and liberal institutions and rights-based politics (Ellermann 2009; Joppke 1998). Despite their contributions and insight, they seem limited in explaining immigration policy in illiberal states. For instance, under similar economic conditions, immigration policies vary dramatically, and illiberal states provide little to immigrants in terms of welfare benefits (Mirilovic 2010, 274–275). Interest groups and political parties are not independent, influential actors in the same way as their counterparts are in liberal democracies (Kim and Gandhi 2010; Duvanova 2013; Gandhi 2008).

Making a departure from the focus of extant studies on Western democracies, some scholars have conducted studies on immigration policies in the Global South (Abdelaaty 2021; González-Murphy and Koslowski 2011; Kalicki 2019; Sadiq 2009). A considerable body of literature on immigration in Russia and Kazakhstan also offers important insights into the politics of migration (Abashin 2017; Buckley 2017; Denisenko 2017; Dyatlov 2009; Heusala 2018; Ivakhnyuk 2009; Kingsbury 2017; Laruelle 2013; Light 2016; Malakhov 2014; Mukomel 2005; Oka 2013; Ryazantsev 2007; Sadovskaya 2014; Schenk 2018; Shevel

2011; Zayonchkovskaya, Florinskaya, and Tyuryukanova 2011; Zeveleva 2014). In explaining immigration policymaking in Russia, studies have emphasized the role of the boundaries of national identity, international organizations, and the financial burdens of immigrants, and the salience of the North Caucasus conflict (Shevel 2011; Light 2006, 2016). Recently, scholars have focused on corruption and informality and investigated how they shape migration governance (Reeves 2013; Kubal 2016; Malakhov 2014; Malakhov and Simon 2018; Schenk 2018; Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021). Dissecting migration management, these studies show how migration governance works in Russia and offer deep insights into the politics of migration. Yet, as Shin (2017, 1) points out, few attempts have been made to investigate the determinants of immigration policy in autocracies in a *comparative* perspective and provide an analytical framework applicable to other countries.

A series of recent studies has highlighted the impact of regime type on policymaking and theorized about immigration policies in authoritarian states separately (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). These studies point out that different institutional settings formulate the politics of immigration in autocracies distinctly from those in democracies: policymaking is insulated from pressures imposed by anti-immigrant citizens and other domestic actors, such as political parties and business interests. Thus, they highlight the role of economic factors, such as economic growth, natural resources, and bureaucratic politics (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018). By taking institutional settings into account, this strand of research has advanced our understanding of migration politics. Nonetheless, positing that autocrats are free from popular pressures, these recent studies have not fully examined the role of elections. This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the significance of elections in authoritarian settings: the burgeoning literature on authoritarian politics demonstrates that in order to satisfy citizens and ensure the survival of regimes, autocrats pay attention to public opinion and elections and modify

policies around elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015).

Elections and Anti-Immigration Politics in Illiberal States

While some scholars contend that regime dynamics exert little influence on the politics of migration (Schenk 2018; Kluczewska and Korneev 2022), I argue that political regimes are an essential component for the analysis of immigration politics. As existing research has shown (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018), policymaking and migration governance in authoritarian regimes have institutional settings and logic that are distinct from those in democracies. Empirical evidence also shows that immigration policies in illiberal states and democracies diverge remarkably, for instance in terms of inflow restrictions, refugee policies, and enforcement (Shin 2017, 23–25). This suggests that it is necessary to take political regimes into account to explain the politics of immigration.

In this chapter, I develop a theory of illiberal immigration politics that considers regime dynamics and the role of electoral factors. Electoral autocracies have been the most dominant type of contemporary dictatorship (Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg 2020, 466): two-thirds of post-Cold War autocracies hold multiparty elections for the legislature (Miller 2020). Although the ruling regimes have resources such as repression, patronage, and electoral fraud to win elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009), their share of votes and popularity is variable, and elections sometimes produce surprising results (Miller 2015). Yet for regime survival, autocrats need sweeping victories. Small margins could signal a regime's weakness and trigger popular demand for democratization (Simpser 2013, 5). Thus, autocrats strive to maintain high levels of popularity and to produce landslide elections to create what Magaloni (2006, 15) calls 'an image of invincibility'. Such an impression shows elites and citizens that the ruling regime is

unconquerable, which discourages potential challengers (Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2013).

Therefore, when there is a high level of electoral competition, authoritarian regimes need to boost their popularity. Studies show that autocrats are attentive to election results and their approval ratings and adjust social and economic policies accordingly to rally public support (Blaydes 2011; Mahdavi 2015; Miller 2015). My argument is in line with these studies that elections can influence policy in authoritarian regimes. Still, the difference derives from that fact that immigration policy has a mobilization effect, as I will elaborate below.

When there is a high level of electoral competition, autocrats in immigrant-receiving countries have an incentive to adopt anti-immigration policies. First, immigration may be a source of grievance among the electorate, and the ruling regime can tighten immigration policies to appeal to these anti-immigrant voters. Second, authoritarian regimes can scapegoat immigrants and enact anti-immigration policy, even if immigration is not a direct source of grievance for citizens. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies can be very useful tools for mobilizing popular support. The literature on ethnic conflicts shows that an out-group conflict can increase in-group unity (Coser 1966; Horowitz 1985). As such, politicians have often instigated anti-out-group sentiment to rally popular support. For instance, studies on sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that politicians tend to play the ethnic card to mobilize public support and win elections (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Posner 2004). Given the importance of approval ratings and election results, I posit that autocrats can also utilize this strategy when there is a high level of electoral competition. By whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment, the incumbents can reinforce popular support for the existing in-group.

Nevertheless, an anti-immigration policy can also incur economic and political costs for autocrats. Economically, it means a loss of cheap foreign labour, which would otherwise benefit members of a ruling coalition who own businesses (Mirilovic 2010; Shin 2017). In terms of political costs, the utilization of anti-immigrant

policies and the instigation of anti-immigrant sentiments can pose a threat to the ruling regime. The rise of ethnic nationalism can aggravate inter-ethnic relations and imperil stability. More importantly, heightened nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments can generate popular discontent with the existing regime; if some in-group members have harboured grievances against the existing institution, an out-group conflict can provide an opportunity for the discontented members (McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012). In-group members, who can take a more radical stance on nationalist and migration issues, can challenge the rule of the incumbents (Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

Taking these potential costs of anti-immigrant policies into account, I argue that authoritarian regimes tend to utilize anti-immigrant sentiment and policies when there is a high level of electoral competition—when the costs are far outweighed by the greater need to maintain the stability of the regime. This theory provides two empirical implications. First, authoritarian regimes can change immigration policies in the run-up to elections. Studies have shown that some authoritarian regimes change socioeconomic policies right before elections (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006). One could hypothesize a similar mechanism in immigration policies too. By increasing immigration restrictions prior to elections, the ruling regime can mobilize citizens and appeal to voters. Thus, one could hypothesize that in the run-up to elections, authoritarian regimes are more likely to politicize immigration issues and adopt restrictive immigration policies than at other times.

Second, I assume a post-electoral mechanism in which elections influence migration policies in the subsequent periods. Elections enable citizens to signal dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and thus provide the incumbents with information about citizens' preferences and their own popularity (Malesky and Schuler 2011; Miller 2015). The period after elections can pose a danger to autocrats: research shows that elections and electoral fraud have provided a focal point for electoral revolutions in which the incumbents were overthrown (Beissinger 2007; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015). If the incumbents performed

poorly in the previous election, they need to shore up their popularity using various measures, including anti-migration policy. Thus, I hypothesize as follows: the lower the ruling regime's share of votes in previous elections, the more politicized immigration issues are, and the stricter immigration policies are.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, I conduct comparative case studies with process tracing (Gerring 2007; Collier 2011; Bennett and Checkel 2015), focusing on Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2010s. During this period, labour migration replaced the 'forced migration' of former Soviet citizens in terms of scale and importance. Russia's and Kazakhstan's labour demand and higher wages attracted migrant workers from neighbouring countries, and the visa-free agreements among the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States contributed to a great flow of undocumented migration. The two countries share many factors related to immigration policies: economic dependence on resource exports and similar economic growth trends, weak organized interests and political parties, high levels of xenophobia, high degrees of state capacity, promotion of ethnic return migration, and similar border control environment. Nonetheless, they reveal significant variation in labour immigration policies in the 2010s. Although both Russia and Kazakhstan are electoral autocracies, their levels of electoral competition are different. In measuring the degree of electoral competition, I use the ruling regime's share of votes. The ruling regime in Russia faced a higher level of electoral competition in the 2011–2012 elections. By contrast, Kazakhstan has been closer to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism that has, until recently, been dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Nur Otan political party.

The analysis in this research is based on original data gathered during 11 months of fieldwork in both countries in 2015–2017: government documents, media reports, and 98 semi-structured interviews with local scholars, NGOs, business associations, gov-

ernment officials, and migrants.[3] Given the limited access for interviews, as noted by other scholars of Eurasian politics (Goode 2010; Schenk 2018), and because of practical considerations, I used snowball and convenience sampling strategies (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Considering the politically repressive environment, I anonymized all of the interviewees.[4] To mitigate potential biases in interview evidence, I also triangulated with other qualitative evidence, such as government documents and media reports (Yin 2014).

The Case of Russia

The incumbent regime in Russia enjoys considerable popular support. Despite widespread fraud and manipulation in elections, the Putin regime's high public approval ratings and share of votes are not entirely fake (Frye et al. 2017). The ruling regime has endeavoured to sustain popular support. For instance, the Russian government closely tracks public opinion to take action and change policies, if necessary (Political Science Researcher 87). Popularity is important for the Putin regime because it is the source of his power (Greene and Robertson 2019). A high level of public support serves as a 'political resource': being the most popular leader in the country helps Putin muster support from the ruling elites and pre-empt potential challengers (Greene and Robertson 2019, 7–8).

Against this background, the 2011–2012 election results and post-election protests came as a severe shock to the ruling regime. In September 2011, Vladimir Putin, then prime minister, and Dmitry Medvedev, then president, declared that Putin would run in the presidential election in March 2012, and that they would essentially switch roles. This decision fuelled public anger. Moreover, the financial crisis and falling oil prices stunted the previously high rate of economic growth which had prompted popular support for the Putin regime (Treisman 2011). Consequently, the ruling regime in Russia performed poorly in the 2011–2012 elections. In the December 2011 parliamentary election, the dominant party, United Russia (UR), obtained 49.3 per cent of the vote

and 238 out of 450 parliamentary seats (Gel'man 2015, 119). Yet several alternative sources estimated that its actual vote share was much lower than the official one (Zimmerman 2014, 268). With slogans like 'Fair elections' and 'Putin, go away!' citizens took to the streets in Moscow, St Petersburg, and some small cities. A few months later, in the March 2012 presidential election, Putin also received fewer votes than in previous elections.

The 2011–2012 elections were unprecedented in three respects. First, it was the lowest share of votes the ruling regime had ever received under Putin's government (See Table 3.1). If Putin had faced a runoff, he would have defeated the other candidate. Nonetheless, contesting a second round would have made him appear weak and that could have led to a 'fundamental system shift' in Russian politics (Lipman and Petrov 2012; Zimmerman 2014, 287). Thus, the Putin regime took more aggressive measures in the presidential elections to avoid any question of a runoff (Gel'man 2015). Second, with the estimated number of protesters varying from 25,000 to 100,000, the December 2011 mass gathering in Moscow was the largest public protest movement in post-Soviet Russia's history (Gel'man 2015, 106). Third, it was the first time the two major political opponents of the ruling regime, the nationalists and the liberal democrats, were united in calling for the resignation of the incumbent government (Pain 2016, 53).

Table 3.1: The ruling regime's vote shares in Russia (%)

	Legislative election	**Presidential election**
2003–2004	37.6	71.3
2007–2008	64.3	70.3
2011–2012	49.3	63.6
2016–2018	54.2	76.7

Note: The legislative election results of 2003–2004 should be read differently because up until 2007, Putin and the ruling regime had dismissed the idea of one dominant party and had attempted to build multiple parties (Panov and Ross 2013, 740).

The 2011–2012 election results and post-electoral protests disturbed the authorities. The incumbent regime needed to take measures to boost its low level of popularity. To this end, it found anti-migrant policy a useful tool. Compared with the majority of European countries, Russian citizens have shown a far higher level of xenophobia (Gudkov 2006; Gorodzeisky, Glikman, and Maskileyson 2015). Russian experts pointed out that provoking anti-immigrant sentiment could help boost public support for the ruling regime. A migration researcher noted, 'If the government cannot provide people with a decent living, how can they sustain their rule? They have no choice but to create common enemies—migrants' (Migration Researcher 73). In a similar vein, Vladimir Mukomel (2015) pointed out that in a society such as Russia's, where people's trust in the authorities is low, xenophobia can function as a foundation for 'new solidarities'.

Putin began politicizing immigration issues in the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for March 2012. In January 2012, he published a series of articles in major newspapers, declaring the direction of his government as part of the election campaign. In one of these articles, 'Russia: The National Issue', Putin touched on the topics of migration and inter-ethnic relations (Putin 2012). Previously, the Russian authorities had tended to avoid ethnic nationalism, which promotes ethnic Russians as the core of the state (Kolstø 2016). In his article, Putin broke with the past and put more weight on ethnic nationalism by using the expression '*russkii* statehood', announcing that ethnic Russians were a 'state-forming' nation (Kolstø 2016, 39). He also promised to solve 'the migration problem', providing detailed plans. These included improving the quality of the migration policy on selective admission, toughening registration rules and punishment for violations, strengthening the judicial system and law enforcement, and integrating migrants into society (Putin 2012). In particular, regarding integration, Putin highlighted that the Russian government would require migrants' 'willingness to familiarize themselves with our culture and language', and migrants would have to

pass a Russian language, history, literature, and law exam (Putin 2012).

Putin fulfilled his promises and plans as soon as he entered the presidency. When he took office in May 2012, he issued a series of presidential decrees regarding various political and social issues, the so-called 'May decree' (*maiskii ukaz*). In one of the decrees, 'On Providing Inter-Ethnic Harmony', he ordered the introduction of language, history, and law exams for immigrants and tougher control of illegal migration (*Itar-Tass* 2016). Putin also directed changes in migration policies in the annual presidential addresses. An analysis of presidential addresses between 2000 and 2018 shows that the Russian president placed greater emphasis on migration issues in the 2011–2013 addresses.[5] In the 2012 address, Putin emphasized the severity of illegal immigration and the necessity to toughen 'penalties against illegal immigration and violations of registration rules' (President of the Russian Federation 2012). He also noted that relevant bills had been already submitted to the Duma, and that he had asked the deputies to pass them (President of the Russian Federation 2012).

In the 2013 address, Putin argued that 'the lack of proper order in foreign labour migration' created labour market distortions, provoked ethnic conflicts, and led to higher crime rates (President of the Russian Federation 2013). After laying out a detailed plan for the work permit system for all labour immigrants, he emphasized the need to enact stricter immigration restrictions:

> We need to strengthen control over the purposes of entry of foreign nationals. All civilized countries do this. The government has to know why and for what duration foreigners come to Russia. For this we need to solve problems with foreigners who come to Russia from visa-free regime countries and stay in Russia for a long period of time without definite purpose … The period of their stay in Russia must be limited, and the entry to Russia must be banned for foreign nationals who violate the law. (President of the Russian Federation 2013)

This 2013 address demonstrates a significant change in the ruling regime's view of migration. No other presidential addresses from 2000 to 2018 emphasized enforcement of the migration policy or provided concrete details as extensive as those in the address of 2013. Even in the 2007 address, President Putin did not refer to migration policy or ethnic conflicts—despite the fact that it was just a year after violent clashes between ethnic Russians and North Caucasians in Kondopoga and other towns, after which migration had become a widely debated issue in the media and politics (President of the Russian Federation 2007).

Following the policy changes directed in Putin's presidential decrees and addresses, the Duma (Lower House) approved laws that tightened both admission and enforcement policies. In November 2011, just a month before the parliamentary election in December, UR parliamentarians proposed a bill that mandated migrants who worked in the housing, utilities, trade, and social service sectors to pass a Russian language exam (Kozenko 2011). Even before this bill was approved, in October 2012, UR members had introduced another bill in the Duma that required all migrant workers, except highly skilled ones, to take the obligatory language, history, and law exam (Russian Legal Information Agency 2012). Dmitry Viatkin, one of the bill's initiators, commented that 'the goals of this bill are absolutely obvious, which originate from the president's decree' (State Duma 2013a). Accordingly, since 2015 all labour migrants, except high-skilled workers and migrants from Belarus and Kazakhstan, have to pass a test on Russian language, history, and law (Ria Novosti 2013). This new policy faced little opposition from businesses (Business Organization Representative 1), as it imposed additional requirements on migrants while reducing them for businesses. A former government official, now employed by a major business association, remarked, 'For businesses, the change is inconsequential'. He emphasized, 'passing exams and paying work permit fees are prerequisites for migrants *before* they can apply for jobs' (Business Organization Representative 2). Regarding this policy, a migration expert emphasized the roles of public opinion: 'I think that

these laws are passed under the influence of public opinion … it [the exam] was not discussed with experts. It is because experts strongly criticized similar attempts in 2010 and 2011' (Migration Researcher 72). Another expert made a similar remark: 'This was a desire to indulge in xenophobic sentiment that exists in Russian society, and to present a package of measures that seems commonsensical, like providing immigrant adaptation' (Migration Researcher 61). These interviews suggest that the ruling regime introduced immigrant restrictions to strengthen its public popularity by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment.

The mayoral election in Moscow in September 2013 boosted the politicization of migration and an increase in immigrant restrictions. In this election, Sergey Sobianin, then the mayor of Moscow, was competing with Alexei Navalny, an influential anti-corruption activist and a political opponent to the Putin regime. This was the first time in ten years that Muscovites had had the chance to choose their mayor directly. While all mayoral candidates embraced anti-immigrant rhetoric, Sobianin utilized the migration issue more than any other competitor (Pain 2014; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2018). Experts point out this was due to the fact that Sobianin faced a certain level of competition (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2018; Abashin 2014). According to Sergey Abashin, 'the appearance of limited political competition in elections caused sharp politicization of a migration issue: the political opposition used it, considering it as a weak spot of the system, and, in response, the authorities tried to demonstrate that they actively worked on this problem' (2014, 22; translated by the author). The media also increasingly reported on migration issues. Aleksander Verkhovsky, director of the Sova Centre, a Russian research organization on racism and nationalism, pointed out a change in the use of migrantphobia in state-aligned TV channels (Taub 2015):

> In 2013 … there was an official anti-migrant campaign that year on TV. Usually, the official line is to avoid talking about [migrant issues], but in 2013 something was broken in this mechanism … this campaign was conducted in several regions, including Mos-

> cow and St Petersburg. We saw a lot of news about the 'crimes of migrants', and other such things. Much more than previously.

As acting mayor, Sobianin had also implemented a series of immigration restrictions in the run-up to the election. In the summer of 2013, Moscow conducted multiple large-scale operations to find illegal immigrants, and the number of apprehended and deported immigrants increased dramatically (Vinogradov 2013). According to an unnamed police officer, such operations targeting migrants on such a scale were unprecedented in Moscow (Nikol'skii 2013). In addition, Sobianin proposed to the federal Duma a bill that would broaden conditions for the deportation of immigrants in Moscow and St Petersburg (State Duma 2013b). This bill was submitted to the Duma in July 2013, two months before the mayoral election.

Following President Putin's order and the politicization of immigration, intensified by the election in Moscow, the Russian federal authorities continued to toughen enforcement and criminal penalties for undocumented migrants. The Duma passed a series of amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences that widened conditions for the deportation and re-entry ban on immigrants. Some laws were initiated directly by the president (such as the law on 'rubber apartments'[6]) and by the administration (such as the law on the blacklisting of migrants). These amendments led to a sharp increase in the number of expelled immigrants after 2013 (Troitskii 2016). Russian experts linked these changes to Putin's initiative. A researcher pointed out, 'After the president signed a presidential decree in May 2012 that emphasized war on illegal migration, the Duma adopted all these measures … When these laws were adopted, the authorities did not discuss them with experts at all' (Migration Researcher 72).

However, Russian immigration policy underwent a complete reversal, as the regime faced no competition because of electoral rule changes and Putin's soaring popularity, due especially to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Hutcheson and McAllister 2018). The Crimea rally had 'game-changing implications' for Russian

domestic politics: Putin's ratings remained above 80 per cent between March 2014 and April 2018, and he and UR fared better in the 2016–2018 elections (Hale 2018: 370; see Table 3.1). The ruling regime no longer needed to gain popularity using migration issues, and this change had a significant impact on the politics of immigration. For example, in 2014–2016, Putin did not discuss migration issues in presidential addresses. Russian media and the authorities politicized migration less, and popular xenophobia declined (Kingsbury 2017). In my interviews conducted in 2016–2017, many Russian experts suggested migration was no longer 'an agenda of the day' (*povestka dnia*) as Crimea had galvanized the political system (Head of NGO 29). In December 2016, the Duma abolished the 2012 amendment that stipulated migrants' immediate deportation from Moscow and St Petersburg (Sputnik Tajikistan 2016). This reversal clearly shows how electoral competition can significantly influence the politics of immigration in illiberal states.

The Case of Kazakhstan

Until recently, Kazakhstan's political scene was dominated by one leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev. President Nazarbayev had ruled the country since before the collapse of the Soviet Union and stepped down only in March 2019. Just like other dictators in Eurasia, sustaining high public popularity was important for him (Hale 2015). According to Schatz (2009), for Nazarbayev to sustain soft authoritarian rule, mobilizing a core of committed supporters was crucial. Nazarbayev had succeeded in this task: experts argued that he enjoyed soaring popularity and would have easily won free and fair elections (Hale 2015, 249; Schatz and Maltseva 2012, 60). He was credited with Kazakhstan's economic growth, ethnic peace, and geopolitical stability, and he remained very popular, notwithstanding the situation (Busygina 2019; Schatz 2009). For instance, even when the 2008 financial crisis and falling oil prices hit Kazakhstan severely, his popularity continued after a brief dip (Schatz and Maltseva 2012). Thus, a leading expert in

Kazakhstani politics pointed out, elections in Kazakhstan were just 'rituals', and the ruling regime was uninterested in the election results or approval ratings (Political Science Researcher 82).

Nazarbayev and the ruling party Nur Otan have been unchallenged in all elections. Table 3.2 shows their high share of the votes in the legislative (Lower House, Majilis) and presidential elections, and the absence of electoral competition. Since 2004, political opposition parties have won only one seat in legislative elections (Pannier 2016). In the 2007 legislative election, Nur Otan received 88 per cent of the vote but won all 98 available seats because other parties could not meet the threshold of 7% to win a seat. The complete dominance of the Nur Otan party and Nazarbayev in the elections contrasts with the electoral performance of the ruling regime in Russia.

Table 3.2: The ruling regime's vote shares in Kazakhstan (%)

	Legislative election	**Presidential election**
2004–2005	72*	91.1
2007	88.4	–
2011–2012	80.9	95.5
2015–2016	82.2	97.7

Note: * In this election, a pro-presidential Asar party (headed by Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva) ran for the parliament separately. When combining the votes of the president's Otan party and the Asar party, the ruling regime won 72 per cent of the vote.

With the high level of popular support for the ruling regime and the absence of electoral competition, the Kazakh authorities have not needed to play the migration card. Despite Kazakhstan's much-touted inter-ethnic accord, research shows that xenophobia and nationalist sentiment are present in the country. When Kazakhstan was still part of the Soviet Union, ethnic tension existed in

the country (Beissinger 2002: 73–74). Survey results show that Kazakhs harbour animosity towards other ethnic groups and immigrants (World Values Survey 2010–2014), and inter-ethnic frictions continue to break out. Yet following Kazakhstan's independence, Nazarbayev adopted a 'subtle and sensitive approach to nationality issues' without instigating Kazakh nationalism (Suny 1999, 175). Although the government has promoted Kazakhization processes through the language policy and repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs, the Kazakh authorities have not fully tilted towards ethnic nationalism (Cummings 2005; Sharipova, Burkhanov, and Alpeissova 2017). Many factors account for such a policy: the significant size of non-Kazakh ethnic groups at the time of independence, 'the fuzzy boundaries' between Kazakh and Russian culture, and the dominance of the Russian language (Cummings 2005, 78; Sharipova, Burkhanov, and Alpeissova 2017).

More importantly, experts point out, the stimulation of nationalism may pose a political risk for the ruling regime in Kazakhstan (Kubicek 1998). Nationalists have the potential to be the strongest opponents of the incumbent regime (Laruelle 2015; Former Government Official 55), although they are weak at the moment. Since Kazakhstan's independence, Kazakh nationalists have been ardent opponents of Nazarbayev, and thus, the authorities have banned them (Kubicek 1998, 35; Laruelle 2015, 26; Political Science Researcher 82). Currently, anti-Nazarbayev discourses are shared mostly by Kazakh nationalist youth (Laruelle 2015, 26). A former government official argued that the ruling regime in Kazakhstan wants to maintain the Soviet model by just replacing Russians with Kazakhs as the titular group (Former Government Official 13).

Consequently, the ruling regime in Kazakhstan has not instigated anti-immigrant sentiment or politicized immigration from Central Asia. The Nazarbayev regime has been adept at framing issues on the political agenda (Schatz 2009; Schatz and Maltseva 2012), and the president's speeches served as one important tool. Thus, to examine the politicization of immigration issues, I analyse the president's annual addresses between 1997 and 2018.[7] The

results reveal the depoliticization of immigration from Central Asia by the regime. The president touched on the topics of immigration control only in 2006 and 2012, with neutral descriptions, while placing greater emphasis on emigration, high-skill immigration, and *oralman*.[8] In the 2006 address, Nazarbayev described immigration as a strategy to develop a modern social policy and proposed the legalization of undocumented migrants:

> We need a modern concept of migration policies. The current favourable social and economic situation in Kazakhstan creates conditions for inflow of a foreign workforce. The Government, considering the experience of other countries, needs to develop a mechanism for conducting a one-time [sic] legalization of labour migrants illegally working in Kazakhstan by registering them with Internal Affairs and other appropriate authorities. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2006)

It is noteworthy that Nazarbayev did not depict irregular migration negatively in the 2006 address. He did not delve deeply into issues relating to low-skill migration but rather emphasized the need to attract high-skilled migrants and to repatriate ethnic Kazakhs from other countries:

> Moreover, we need to develop mechanisms to attract highly qualified and professional workers to Kazakhstan who could work in our country on a permanent basis … Our attention should be focused more on creation of conditions for preparatory training in special centres, and the adaptation and integration of *oralman* into our society. If they are taught the language and a profession, as is the case in other countries who have returnees, they will adapt to new conditions more quickly. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2006)

After 2006, it was only in December 2012 that President Nazarbayev again discussed migration issues in the address. In 2012, similarly to the 2006 address, he paid greater attention to the question of how to reduce emigration than to controlling immigration into the country:

> We need to take measures to resolve complex migration problems that have an influence on labour markets in the regions of the country. We need to strengthen control on migration flows from the adjacent countries. As a prospective aim we are expected to create favourable conditions for the local qualified workforce in order to prevent their excessive outflow to the foreign labour markets. In 2013 the Government will have to develop and approve a complex plan to resolve the migration problems. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2012)

As the 2006 and 2012 addresses demonstrate, the Kazakh president highlighted the need to attract high-skilled immigrants and prevent emigration, rather than focusing on control of irregular migration to the country. In addition to the two addresses, President Nazarbayev emphasized the need for high-skilled workers in the 2008 address.[9]

Other government documents also demonstrate the ruling regime's depoliticization of undocumented immigration. In presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, politicians rarely discussed migration control or ethnic issues, while highlighting inter-ethnic harmony (Oka 2009). On the Akorda website, using the keywords 'migrant' (*migrant*) and 'migration' (*migratsiia*) in Russian, I searched and analysed Nazarbayev's public speeches and reports of government meetings (Security Council, Ministry, and Nur Otan party).[10] The results show that in meetings, the president and officials focus on *oralman*, high-skill immigration, and internal migration. Immigration control has attracted attention occasionally in relation to terrorism and extremism, yet it has always received a lower priority.

The president's neglect of migration has had significant implications for migration policy. To quote Dosym Satpaev, a leading expert in Kazakhstani politics, Kazakhstan has 'an expert presidential system, where the president has greater control of all political levers, and all political players' (cited in Isaacs 2011, 79). The president has the most formal authority over every policy, while the legislature has no political opposition or power to check the president (Cook 2007, 202–203). Thus, policies reflect the ideas of

the president and the officials he selects (Darden 2009, 207–2078). Migration policy has not been an exception. One example is an amnesty for undocumented immigrants declared in 2006. Following the aforementioned president's address in 2006, Kazakhstan legalized the status of 164,000 undocumented immigrants. Local migration experts have indicated that the presidential administration and his ministries have played an important role in migration policymaking processes, while parliamentarians have seldom proposed bills and businesses have exerted little influence on policymaking, notwithstanding their attempts to do so (Migration Researcher 65; Former Government Employee 11; Legal Consultant 30; Ministry Official 74).

Following the president and his circle's ideas, the Kazakhstani government has turned a blind eye to undocumented migrants, without introducing policies to control them. A former employee at Nur Otan's think tank, the Institute of Public Policy, stated that the government had been indifferent to migration issues (Former Government Employee 11):

> When I was in the working group for the Security Council in 2015, the Council was not interested in illegal migration at all. They were more interested in internal migration from south to north … The government did not acknowledge the existence of unregistered migrants from Central Asia. For instance, in a TV show, migration police officers said that migrants are in Kazakhstan for private reasons, not for work.

Other migration experts and political analysts shared this view (Davé 2014; Migration Researcher 51). One sociologist pointed out, 'It is not even a denial, but they [the government] just do not look at them [inter-ethnic conflicts]. And they do not want to change it' (Sociology Researcher 98). Officials tend to focus on interracial tension between Russians and Kazakhs, but most conflicts occur between Kazakhs and other marginal ethnic groups in the countryside due to acute economic competition for resources (Sociology Researcher 98). Officially, Kazakhstan is free of interethnic problems. When ethnic violence breaks out, the authorities

emphasize that it occurs at the domestic level (*bytovom urovne*), not because of structural factors or government policies (Shirokov 2016). Even for local governments in immigrant-receiving regions, migration control is of little importance. In the city council election in Almaty, a popular migrant destination, none of 36 elected deputies touched upon migration in their election programmes.[11]

Ignoring the issue results in an absence of immigration policies. The Kazakhstani government has rarely modified immigration policies for low-skilled immigrants. The current low-skill immigration policy keeps most migrants out of state control. In a press interview in 2007, the director of the migration police said that the authorities had discussed changing regulations pertaining to low-skilled migrants (Regnum 2007). However, it was only in 2013 that Kazakhstan amended its policy by introducing permits (*patent*) for low-skilled immigrants working in noncommercial activities. Regarding this policy change, government officials pointed out that it was motivated by Russia's permit system (Ministry Official 74; Ministry Official 75). An official from the Ministry of Healthcare and Social Protection said: 'If there are better things, then we adopt them … In a neighbouring country [Russia], they introduced a system based on permits … We studied it. Why not take it? Then we introduced it' (Ministry Official 74). It is noteworthy that the Kazakhstani authorities did not change their policy until they saw the Russian example. Still, this new policy does not regulate most low-skilled immigrants hired by enterprises. A government official in the Ministry of National Economy acknowledged: 'Anyway, they [immigrants] come and work … The issue of low-skilled immigration has not been solved by the state' (Ministry Official 75). The case of Kazakhstan demonstrates how the absence of electoral competition facilitates no policy for immigration, and, paradoxically, a country open for immigrants.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the politics of migration by demonstrating how regime dynamics of illiberalism can shape immigration policies, focusing on the hitherto neglected effects of electoral factors. I show that electoral competition can be a key factor facilitating immigration restrictions, even in illiberal regimes. In that regard, as Natter (2018) and Schenk (2018) argue, the politics of immigration does not vary strikingly between liberal democracies and illiberal states. This research, however, provides nuanced insights by suggesting a different mechanism through which the same electoral factors play a role, depending on political regimes: electoral factors affect immigration policy because autocrats endeavour to sustain popularity, not because the influence of far-right parties, swing voters, or immigrant voters matter for politicians, as they do in a democracy.

Considering that the findings are based on comparative case studies on Russia and Kazakhstan, the generalizability of this research has limitations. Russia, Kazakhstan, and their immigrant-sending states share Soviet legacies, and political opposition consists of nationalists, not moderates, in both countries. Nonetheless, given the significance of public popularity for autocrats and the mobilization effect of anti-immigrant sentiment, the findings could be relevant to other immigrant-receiving autocracies outside Russia and Eurasia. For example, Natter and Thiolett (2022) show that even in Saudi Arabia, a strongly authoritarian country, the monarchy utilizes immigration as a legitimacy-generating tool. To validate the applicability of the findings in this chapter rigorously, future studies could explore cases in which the ruling regime faces political opponents who are moderates or have pro-immigration interests.

Notes

1 This chapter is released under the CC-BY 4.0 license, as it builds on the author's earlier work: Joo, Song Ha. 2024. 'Elections and Immigration Policy in Autocracy: Evidence from Russia and Kazakhstan.' *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 59: 482–503. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.47.

2 In 2020, in terms of foreign-born population, the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries included Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Malaysia, Jordan, Pakistan, and Kuwait (Migration Policy Institute 2020).

3 IRB approval was obtained for this study on 25 May 2016 (Protocol# 7740).

4 The full list of interviewees is provided in Table A6 on pages 19–21 in the following link: https://static.cambridge.org/content/id/urn%3Acambridge.org%3Aid%3Aarticle%3AS0017257X22000471/resource/name/S0017257X22000471sup001.docx.

5 Available on the Kremlin website, www.kremlin.ru, accessed 1 August 2022.

6 According to Russian law, foreign citizens must register if they stay in Russia longer than a week. 'Rubber apartments' denotes a situation in which hundreds of foreign migrants are registered in the same apartment to obtain registration documents.

7 Available on the Akorda (the presidential administration) website, www.akorda.kz, accessed 8 February 2019. I analysed documents both in Russian and in English-language translations.

8 *Oralman* denotes ethnic Kazakhs who migrated to Kazakhstan from other countries such as Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and China after the country's independence.

9 In the 2008 address, Nazarbayev said, 'Second, I commission the Government and national entities … to develop and implement the program on the further development of professional and technical education. This program should provide for the attraction of foreign scientists and teachers to the areas of education most useful to the national economy.' (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2008).

10 I accessed the Akorda website on 8 February, 2019, and the keyword search yielded 32 documents.

11 Almaty City Council website (www.mga.kz), accessed 20 February 2019.

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CHAPTER 4

The Politicization of Labour Migration in Post-Soviet Russia

Competing Projects of Post-Socialist Development

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Abstract

Like liberal democracies, Russia, as one of the world's largest immigration destinations, must manage numerous political conflicts related to immigration to ensure political stability. The majority of migration scholarship characterizes Russia's political response to immigration as contradictory and interprets this as an expression of the authoritarian, patrimonial, and populist Russian state. To complement this literature, the chapter shows how Russian migration policy is linked to broader problems and conflicts of post-socialist change. Based on an analysis of the Russian expert discourse on labour migration, it argues that the competing political projects of labour migration are an expression of a

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society that is renegotiating its post-socialist coordinates in economic, cultural, and global terms.

Keywords: labour migration, post-Soviet Russia, political rationalities, migration policy

Introduction

For most international observers, it comes as no surprise that Russia, along with India and Mexico, is one of the countries with the highest number of emigrants (UN 2020b, 16). Likewise, it is widely known that this trend has further intensified since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has already caused more than 300,000 people to leave the country (OK Russians 2022). At the same time, and often unacknowledged by international migration scholarship, Russia ranks among the world's largest immigration destinations, with 11.6 million international migrants (UN 2020a) and an annual influx of more than 500,000 people. Despite a sharp drop in immigration due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 594,146 migrants officially entered Russia in 2020 (Rosstat 2020). Russia's migration history is closely linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union into 15 separate states, which 'transformed yesterday's internal migrants, secure in their Soviet citizenship, into today's international migrants of contested legitimacy and uncertain membership' (Brubaker 1992, 269). In addition, the dramatic economic, political, and social restructuring of the post-socialist transformation fuelled an intensive and complex mobility dynamic in the post-Soviet space, which is of ongoing relevance.

Whereas emigration has not yet received much political attention in Russia, immigration flows have been a political issue for decades. Like liberal democracies, Russia, as an illiberal state, must manage numerous political conflicts related to immigration to ensure political stability. Migration scholarship often describes Russia's political response to these large-scale immigration flows as 'messy and paradoxical' (Light, 2016, 2), 'full of inconsistent and conflicting tendencies' (Heusala 2018, 431), and shaped by 'high levels of corruption' (Round and Kuznetsova 2016, 3). For

most of the literature, the contradictory character is an expression of an authoritarian, patrimonial, and populist state. From such a perspective, migration policy appears as a tool of political power within an informalized authoritarian system (Light 2016; Malakhov and Simon 2018; Schenk 2018).

However, this focus on the Russian state does not place migration policy in the context of broader societal dynamics of post-socialist change. Particularly noteworthy are those works that have shed light on the entanglement of migration policy and Russia's political economy (Filin and Paraskeva 2011; Krasinets 2012; Cook 2017; Heusala and Aitarmurto 2017), migration policy and the question of membership and belonging in the post-imperial multi-ethnic state (e.g., Shevel 2011; Rudenko 2014; Malakhov 2016; Kangaspuro and Heusala 2017; Myhre 2017), and migration policy and geopolitical constellations and agendas (e.g., Ivakhnyuk 2007; Laruelle 2015; Grigas 2016; Ryazantsev 2016; Schenk 2016; Gulina 2019; Kuznetsova 2020). Moreover, research on the Soviet legacy is crucial to understanding the societal condition and historical specificities of Russian migration policy (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018; Heusala 2018).

One key message that I take from this body of literature is that migration processes and conflicts cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social context but are an integral part of social change. To complement this literature, this chapter analyses the social construction of labour migration policy within the Russian expert discourse between 2010 and 2021 and answers the question of how labour migration is politicized in post-Soviet Russia.[1] It argues that the identified expert rationalities on migration can be understood as competing projects of 'post-socialist development'. Each rationality, when constructing migration, draws different conclusions about how to overcome the challenges of post-socialist change in the context of migration policy and thus attempts to justify different models of political regulation. The identified projects address questions of Russia's economic development path, issues of national boundaries and belonging, and problems of Russia's global positioning as a post-empire. Thus,

the chapter broadens the understanding of Russian migration policy by illuminating its social embeddedness, and shows how contested, dynamic, and broad the frontiers of labour migration policy in Russia are.

The Social Construction of Migration in the Post-Socialist Context

Referring to 'political rationality'[2] as an overarching concept, I build an analytical framework to study how migration is generated as a political object within the Russian expert discourse. According to Rose and Miller (1992), political rationalities can be understood as a particular knowledge of the object over which power should be exercised. This knowledge is the precondition for conceiving the object as something that 'can be governed and managed, evaluated and programmed, in order to increase wealth, profit and the like' (Rose and Miller 1992, 182). It is a way of thinking and interpreting social reality to generate definitions of problems, constitute political objects, and conceptualize possible solutions. In the context of migration, three dominant forms of problem construction have been identified, the 'economization', 'securitization', and 'humanitarization' of migration, each based on specific hierarchical classifications that guide and justify certain logics of political regulation (Amelina and Horvath 2020).

The process of 'economization' addresses migration as an economic issue that must be regulated according to the logic of cost–benefit analysis (Amelina 2020; Carmel 2011; Horvath 2014; Schierup, Hansen, and Castles 2006). As such, migration is primarily discussed as labour migration, the legitimacy of which is evaluated according to its expected economic value for the societies involved. Linked to such reasoning are political attempts that aim to maximize and optimize the economic benefits of migration flows and minimize the costs of immigration (Faist 2008: 38). The securitization of migration qualifies migration primarily as an unwanted and dangerous phenomenon that represents a question of security for the receiving society. It defines migration as

an existential threat to the autonomy and freedom of the receiving political community in terms of its independent identity and functional integrity (Huysmans 2006, 61). This concerns the socioeconomic level, where migration is associated with unemployment, the informal economy, and strains on the welfare state, but also issues of national identity and cultural cohesion, as well as the public policy area, where migration is associated with organized crime, human trafficking, and terrorism (Boswell 2007; Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002). Accordingly, migration is linked mainly to the categories of 'uncontrolled', 'illegal', and 'unwanted' migration, which is opposed to that of 'desirable migration' or simply those groups whose mobility is normalized, such as businesspeople or wealthy tourists. The differentiation between 'wanted' and 'unwanted migration' often goes along with essentializing constructions of 'cultural' and 'racialized difference' and intersects with notions of gender and class, based on which hierarchized social boundaries are created (Amelina and Horvath 2020). Political agendas following this problem construction typically imply the logic of control and surveillance but can also inform integration policies (Bigo 2014; Horvath 2014). Finally, the 'humanitarization' of migration frames migration as a moral question in relation to suffering subjects and distinguishes refugees who are in need of protection from those who are not (Fassin 2011). Linked to this are logics of governance in terms of protection, based on the notion of compassion and moral sentiments.

Importantly, political rationalities of migration do not occur in a vacuum. To understand the rationalities of Russian migration policy, its social construction must be examined against the background of a post-socialist condition. This does not necessarily mean that Russia represents an exceptional case in comparison with Western cases of migration policy. Yet it does mean that questions of migration are considered and debated from a different global and historical perspective than in Western European immigration countries. Focusing on Russia's post-socialist condition, let us pay attention to the temporal and global dimensions of political negotiations. The temporal dimension of the

post-socialist context encourages us to ask how the social construction of migration as a political object relates to the socialist past, the post-socialist present, and the future. The global dimension points to Russia's specific position within a globalized world—often labelled East European—and integration into the post-Cold War capitalist world order, marked by the structural hierarchies of global capitalism (Gagyi 2016). It concerns the new global interdependencies and power relationships that have unfolded since the fall of the Soviet Union and informs questions of how the social construction of migration policy is linked to Russia's self-positioning as a post-empire within post-Cold War constellations.

In summary, the social construction of migration as a political object takes place in a historically specific social context that is tied to a specific historical and global position. Against this background, Russian migration policy represents a fascinating case that contributes to a better understanding of how migration discourse is connected with broader questions of development and social change and demonstrates how context-specific constructions of migration are embedded in global power regimes. This brings forward a more nuanced answer to the question of why migration becomes a 'political problem' and how societies respond to the phenomena of mobility in a specific way. Thus, we can come to a better understanding of the politics of opening and closing and the contradictory dynamics characterized by both the inclusion of some people and the exclusion of others.

Analysing the Russian Expert Discourse

Following a broad understanding of experts that goes beyond the academic milieu and includes any actor that accumulates special knowledge in their daily routines (Stehr and Grundmann 2011), the field of migration expertise in Russia appears to comprise a very diverse spectrum of non-state actors. Apart from traditional types of actors such as academics or representatives of international organizations, the expert discourse is also constituted by

human rights activists, lawyers, trade unionists, cultural professionals, social workers, and diaspora representatives. To reveal how migration is linked to broader societal negotiations of social change, this chapter studies how labour migration is problematized and discussed within this expert field.

Even if non-state experts cannot directly influence migration policy decisions, there are various formal and informal institutions of interaction which show that experts play an important role in the conceptualization, implementation, and legitimization of migration policy (Volokh 2015). Expert knowledge plays an important role in migration policy not because experts can directly influence policy, but because they produce much of the knowledge that establishes the link between migration and social development in the first place. Moreover, expert knowledge creates spaces of possibility and legitimation for certain policies, even if these may follow other power calculations.

The analysis[3] is based on more than a hundred publications produced by the various expert types mentioned above. Thus, the text corpus represents a unique collection of diverse expert positions that provides new insights into the social construction and negotiation of migration as a political object. In addition, the analysis draws on 48 qualitative interviews with leading migration policy experts to complement and deepen the understanding of political rationalities gained from expert publications. The interviews were conducted in the period between September 2017 and March 2019 during four fieldwork stays in Moscow and St Petersburg. They were conducted and transcribed in Russian and anonymized by using pseudonyms. The quotes cited in this chapter were translated into English.

Political Rationalities of Labour Migration

In the following section, I will present the three prevailing political rationalities of immigration identified in the expert debate. I will show how each rationality assigns a specific role to labour migration in achieving economic development and strengthening

Russia's global competitiveness, thereby justifying different policy attempts to regulate migration. The first rationality, *global competitiveness through selective recruitment*, views large-scale labour migration as a condition for economic growth and global competitiveness and promotes political efforts to stimulate and integrate migrants selectively. The second rationality, *technological modernization without guest workers*, presents labour migration as a substantial threat to the Russian economy and national security and advocates a migration policy that closes the doors to immigrants who are labelled as culturally alien. Lastly, the third rationality, *mutual benefits through Eurasian integration*, views labour circulation as a powerful instrument for regional development and strives for further integration of the post-Soviet space.

Global Competitiveness through Selective Recruitment

The first political rationality of labour migration identified in the Russian expert discourse is promoted by a diverse strategic alliance of expert organizations and represents the most dynamic approach. Representatives include think tanks, business interest groups, scholars from various research institutes, social NGOs, and diaspora organizations. Overall, the political rationality presents large-scale labour migration to Russia as a substantial component of Russia's economic development and an inevitable alternative under the condition of rapid demographic decline. The core argument brought forward by experts of this rationality is that a continuing decline in the working-age population due to low birth rates threatens Russia's economic development, causing labour shortages in various sectors of the economy (Demintseva, Mkrtchyan, and Florinskaya 2018). Labour migration is promoted because it seems to be the only way to cope with depopulation and the related economic problems resulting from the demand for labour exceeding the domestic supply (Tyuryukanova 2013, 313). Experts point particularly to the high demand for workers in labour-intensive sectors, which was generated through the economic growth of the 2000s and is still of continuing relevance

due to the low degree of automation in many production areas. Against this background, labour migrants are seen as an essential part of the labour force and in some sectors even as an indispensable component of the national economy:

> It [immigration] plays a huge role. How many migrant workers do we have? Officially, 11 million migrants are in Russia. About 6–10 per cent of the GDP is created by migrants. There are entire economic activities where exclusively migrants are employed. Without them, we would not have made the Olympics in Sochi, or the APEC [the meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 2012] in Vladivostok, or the World Cup, or our biggest projects. Even in Moscow—who builds all these streets? Pay attention, and you will see who is building. I am not even talking about the infrastructure of gas and oil pipelines. Construction, market trade, housing and utilities, domestic work—these are the activities where they work. Almost everywhere. (Expert interview with Romanov, September 2017)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of borders with post-Soviet republics, the situation even worsened, as the All-Russian Non-Governmental Organization of Small and Medium Business—Opora—notes in a recent publication:

> The shortage of labour may slow down construction, which, although it has not recovered, is considered to be the engine of economic growth: at least in the public sector in the next three years it is planned to invest 2.7 trillion rubles in the construction of federal facilities … and in the private sector demand for real estate is strongly heated by the program of preferential mortgages—in this situation delaying the commissioning of facilities may restrict demand and lead to the development of a 'bubble' in the market. Given that the industry accounts for more than half of all capital investment, this problem becomes particularly acute against the background of government plans to launch a new investment cycle and increase the role of private investors in the economy. (Opora 2020)

Apart from its compensatory role, experts see labour migration as an essential prerequisite for Russia's global economic competitiveness due to its 'low cost'. Aleksandr Grebenyuk, an economist at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, evaluates the impact of labour migration on Russian socioeconomic development in a government-funded research project. He concludes that—among other 'positive effects'—the recruitment of 'foreign labour' ('legal' and 'illegal migration') leads to a reduction in labour costs, thus increasing the profitability of organizations that are subject to high levels of internal and external competition (Grebenyuk 2017, 7). Moreover, he praises the effect that the availability of 'cheap labour' has of driving the growth of foreign direct investments (Grebenyuk 2017, 8).

However, the recruitment of 'foreign workers' appears increasingly challenging. In 2018, the Skolkovo Institute for Emerging Market Studies (IEMS) published an extensive report on the role of migration in economic growth. In this report, Vladimir Korovkin describes a scenario in which competitors surround Russia for 'human capital' from all global directions:

> Time is running out, though. The rapid development of some economies in Asia, including Kazakhstan, China, and the Persian Gulf countries, coupled with an increasingly liberal admission of migrants by most advanced economies in the West, has put Russia in a challenging competitive position in the international market for human capital. (Korovkin 2018, 90)

Russia's weak position in the global competition for 'human capital' is explained by the country's relatively low pace of economic growth, which creates a vicious circle of diminished attractiveness for migrants and a consequential reduction in the 'human resources available to accelerate the economy and improve the attractiveness' (Korovkin 2018, 90). The only advantage assigned to Russia is its accessibility for migrants from the adjacent post-Soviet republics, which is currently upheld by visa-free entry procedures, an extensive network of transportation links, and the existence of financial instruments for making remittances (Korovkin 2018,

55). However, especially those countries that are considered to be 'culturally close' and migrants from which are therefore particularly easy to 'integrate', such as Ukraine or Moldova, are increasingly attracted to Western immigration countries, which in comparison with Russia offer higher standards of income and quality of living (Korovkin 2018, 72). As a result of the economic hardships beginning in 2014, now even migrant workers from Central Asia are shifting their perspective to other destinations, such as Korea, Türkiye, the Gulf states, and China (Korovkin 2018, 73). In addition, global competition for human capital manifests itself in increased emigration flows of high-skilled labour from Russia to other advanced economies, leading to the dynamics of so-called brain drain (Korovkin 2018, 49).

Despite the positive economic assessment, many experts address the influx of labour migrants as a challenge to social cohesion and stability. According to many experts, the 'fast-growing' and 'noticeable presence' of 'migrants' from Central Asia since the early 2000s has resulted in a rise of 'xenophobic feelings' in parts of the Russian society (Mukomel 2013, 694). 'Negative stereotypes' about labour migrants are seen as a threat to social stability, especially if they are disseminated and instrumentalized by 'extremist groups' that provoke conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions (PSP-Fond 2018, 6). Many experts explain that the negative sentiments among the population particularly concern migrants of a 'different ethnic background' and a 'different social milieu with their traditions and cultures' (Mukomel 2013, 294). Therefore, the dilemma is even exacerbated by the fact that Russia has increasingly poorer chances of recruiting workers in the post-Soviet space and, therefore, actually has to attract labour migrants from 'culturally alien' regions about which the population has the most outstanding reservations (Zaionchkovskaya, 2013, 229).

The interpretation of labour migration as a development resource by Russian experts goes along with social boundaries that distinguish migrants in terms of their economic benefits. These boundaries are primarily based on class-based categories such as qualification, income, and profession. These classifications are

accompanied by hierarchical assessments that draw a line between 'unskilled labour migrants' who are in demand for 'lower-paying and less productive jobs to maximize the overall performance of the economy' and 'high-skilled human capital' that enables innovation and technological progress (Korovkin 2018, 31). Aside from economic classifications, boundaries between migrant groups are also constituted in terms of culture. A distinction of cultural difference based on the categories of language, religion, appearance, and demography is widespread. Based on these categories, the Skolkovo business report distinguishes three groups of migrants within the post-Soviet space (Korovkin 2018, 70). Belarus and Ukraine built a first group, which is considered similar to Russian citizens in all respects. Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia constitute a second group, which differs from the Russian linguistically and somewhat in demographic respects but is considered culturally close in terms of religion and not always recognizable as 'foreign'. Finally, Central Asia and Azerbaijan built the culturally most distant group, which differs linguistically and demographically in terms of religion and is considered easily identifiable as foreign. Beyond these boundaries, so-called 'compatriots' form another group, defined as being 'committed to Russian culture and speak[ing] Russian' (Demintseva, Mkrtchyan, and Florinskaya 2018, 20). Finally, 'migrant resources' coming from outside the post-Soviet space, such as Iran, Afghanistan, countries of the Middle East, Pakistan, and India, are distinguished as 'significantly distant in ethnocultural terms' (Korovkin 2018, 19).

Against the backdrop of this framing within the expert rationality of global competitiveness through selective recruiting, three overarching political positions can be identified with regard to migration regulation. First, based on the economic rationality described above, experts promote permanent recruitment of labour according to labour market needs through selective recruiting. Often, experts proposing such differentiated recruitment strategies refer to 'point-based systems', as realized by Canada and other Western immigration countries (Demintseva, Mkrtchyan, and Florinskaya 2018, 42). Western immigration

countries are particularly taken as a role model due to efforts in attracting 'educational migrants' and providing them with privileged entry and residence status (Chudinovskii 2013). In addition, experts refer to the Soviet tradition of labour recruitment, the so-called 'Orgnabor' (English 'organized recruitment'), which should be revised and adapted to the principles of a market society (Kurtser 2015, 79). Second, experts call for a simplification and flexibilization of residence rules in order to legalize migration and thereby make it more profitable for the Russian state. This includes removing bureaucratic hurdles to obtaining short-term or long-term residence permits and simplifying the procedure for obtaining a work permit or labour licence. The simplification of migration rules is advocated because it increases the number of 'legal migrants', who are of greater value to the Russian state due to higher tax revenues (Grebenyuk 2017). Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts such as Vladimir Volokh call for measures to 'make it easier to obtain or extend patents for migrants from visa-free states working in Russia' (Volokh 2020). Third, experts advocate a systematic integration policy that maximizes economic benefits and minimizes social risks. In the light of public resentments against 'culturally distant migrants' and the fear that they could destabilize the society, 'integration' measures are proposed to reduce 'differences' between 'migrants' and the 'receiving society' (Opora 2011, 9). However, the overcoming of these cultural differences between migrants and citizens is evaluated as something that can be learned and acquired if the right conditions are in place and the local population is willing to receive new members.

In sum, the first rationality represents a neoliberal development project aimed at creating the most favourable conditions for companies to take advantage of 'migrant workers', which is seen as a requirement for economic growth and prosperity. Although the social and political rights of migrants play a role in some of the expert debates, they do not have the same relevance as the economic arguments in favour of immigration. This can be explained by the fact that in illiberal states, policy reforms do not

have to be legitimized by reference to human rights. The legitimation of reforms, as this strand of discourse shows, rather feeds on the promise of generating rapid economic growth. The project of global competitiveness through selective recruitment can thus be interpreted as an expression of a 'narrow modernization' (Gel'man et al. 2021), a development path that is designed not to create democratic structures but primarily to become globally competitive 'to achieve a high level of socioeconomic development through rapid economic growth' (Gel'man et al. 2021, 72).

Technological Modernization without Guest Workers

Compared with the first rationality, the field of experts constituting the second political rationality is less dynamic and diverse. Strategic alliances exist between think tanks, trade unions, and academic research institutes. Overall, experts of this political rationality present labour migration as an economic obstacle to technological modernization. Unlike the political rationality identified above, this approach views large-scale labour migration as a major threat to Russian cultural and civilizational identity, especially in the light of disparate global demographical trends. Against this background, experts call for 'culturally distant' 'immigration flows' to be restricted and instead for the shortage of labour to be compensated for by investing in the country's technological modernization.

In contrast to the political rationality described above, which frames labour migration as a fundamental engine of economic growth, experts of this second approach deny any positive connection between migration and economic growth. Instead, they argue that Russia's economic dependence on migration must be overcome by modernizing the economy and increasing labour productivity. In 2014 and 2015, the conservative think tank the Institute for Strategic Development (Russian 'Institut Natsional-noi Strategii', INS) published five extensive reports on the impact of migration on the Russian economy and other large immigration countries. Referring to the German case and its guest worker

regime in the 1960s and 1970s, the authors argue that no positive relationship can be detected between economic growth and migration, as there was no significant economic growth despite increasing numbers of immigrants (INS 2014b, 3). On the other hand, Japan, which pursued a restrictive immigration policy, showed a tremendous growth dynamic between the 1950s and 1980s despite 'serious labour shortages' and an ageing population (INS 2014b, 4). From this comparison, they draw the conclusion that Japan's economic success and its high level of technologization and labour productivity must be the result of the labour deficit: 'The shortage and high cost of labour are considered by many economists as one of the factors that contributed to the Japanese economic miracle and the achievement of extremely high productivity, automation and robotization of industry' (INS 2014b, 4). Thus, what was identified as an economic benefit in the rationality of global competitiveness through selective recruitment—the low costs of foreign labour—is here evaluated as an obstacle to development. Labour migration is seen as a barrier to development because it would reduce incentives for technological modernization and labour productivity growth.

In another report, the INS also rejects the idea that labour migration is needed to compensate for labour shortages due to a shrinking population (INS 2014a, 6). In contrast to the expert opinions presented above, the authors do not see demographic development and labour shortages as the fundamental problem of development, but rather the 'quality of the labour force':

> The main problem that will soon be faced by the new industrialization of Russia … will be not the number of the working population, but its quality (adequacy to the modern technological environment). The barrier to labour force development today is not an abstract 'lack of working hands', but a shortage of specialists in certain categories. (INS 2014a, 6)

This shortage, however, could not be offset by 'immigration flows from Central Asia', which are devalued in terms of their 'language skills', 'minimal professional qualifications', and 'cultural habits

typical for agrarian Islamic countryside' (INS 2015, 17). This assessment is shared by one of my interviewees, Denis Vasiliev, the head of a Moscow-based think tank:

> Most of the immigrants who come to us are people with insufficient cultural and educational levels to perform the hardest jobs, which has a negative impact on the domestic labour market and even on the issues of innovative development. This is because this labour force often proves to be so cheap that it is easier for entrepreneurs in the construction industry to solve their problems using manual labour methods than to buy expensive machines. (Expert interview with Vasiliev, March 2019)

Olga Troitskaya, a political scientist from the Lomonosov Moscow State University, also challenges the argument put forward by liberal experts that labour migration could compensate for population decline and facilitate economic growth, since Russia, unlike other 'advanced economies', is not in the position to attract 'qualified specialists' (Troitskaya 2013, 479). In contrast to the USA, where annually hundreds of thousands of 'specialists' arrive, more than 95 per cent of 'migrant workers' in Russia come from countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as from Türkiye, China, Vietnam, and are 'unskilled' (Troitskaya 2013, 479). Referring to official statistics, she claims that 'qualified foreign workers' are 'just a drop in the boundless sea of migrants' (Troitskaya 2013, 479). In the light of Russia's low level of global competitiveness, this tendency would not change soon but would rather lead to the outflow of Russian 'specialists' (Troitskaya 2013, 480).

The economic argumentation overlaps with a problematization of labour migration as a question of national security. In its publication 'Regulation of Migration: International Experience and Perspectives for Russia', the INS portrays 'culturally distant immigrants' as a risk to public order and claims that people from 'Africa', 'Latin America', 'Kosovo', and 'Albania' as well as other 'Islamic countries' show higher crime rates than people from China and European countries, especially in rape, homicide, and

drug trafficking (INS 2014b, 22). In addition, migration is linked to extremism, such as 'ethnic hate crimes' and 'Islamist terrorism' (INS 2014b, 28). All this leads to a perspective that views migration not as an economic benefit but as an economic burden to the Russian state:

> Because foreign labour puts pressure on the economy, on society. We have to spend extra money to curb the crime associated with it. Everyone understands that these are other crimes caused by other reasons—if only with the fact that a huge number of men live extremely crowded and without women. If only because they are men of a different culture. These people put a huge strain on the health care system. When they linger here, they put a strain on the educational system because children are born. (Delyagin 2020)

Moreover, Mikhail Delyagin argues that many labour migrants do not pay taxes because they are not legally registered in Russia and therefore do not even contribute to the increased burden of public spending (Delyagin 2020). This argument is underpinned by references to Western Europe, where 'culturally alien immigration … has led to a multitude of social problems and is now seen as a major threat to social stability and national security, on a scale that far exceeds the economic dividends of attracting immigrants' (INS 2015, 16).

In addition, experts of this rationality securitize migration as a threat to Russian cultural identity and social stability. In its publication 'Non-Unified Russia. Papers on Ethnopolitics' from 2015, the INS attributes an enormous potential for conflict to migration due to a 'cultural distance' between the 'immigrants' and the local people (INS 2015). Due to differences in the 'ethnocultural type', it claims, 'integration' and 'assimilation' could not be achieved even over a long period of 'coexistence' (INS 2014, 16). Instead, 'autonomous communities' would form, which would cause several problems for the rest of the population (INS 2014). Some experts even go as far as to speak not only of a danger to social cohesion but also of a threat to Russian culture and European

civilization through non-European migration. For instance, Robert Engibaryan, professor and former director of the International Institute of Management at the MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), views 'migrants' from African and Asian countries as 'aggressive destroyers of the European culture' (Engibaryan 2019, 4).

The social construction of non-European immigrants as an essential threat is underpinned by references to Western Europe and the United States, where the idea of 'multiculturalism' has failed, according to experts of this rationality:

> Ethnic crime, religious intolerance, the aggressive imposition of their norms of behavior and cultural values, visible and violent crimes, terrorism, pogroms, and riots by immigrants have become a mass phenomenon in these [Western European] countries and have radically changed the attitude of both ordinary citizens and politicians to the problems of immigration. (INS 2014b, 22)

Similarly, the historian Andrei Fursov substantiates his anti-immigrant position by pointing to the negative consequences that mass immigration would have for Western democracies, such as Germany, where 'aliens, becoming more and more aggressive, are eating up their space, pushing the European lower and middle classes away from the social pie' (Fursov 2018). He warns that 'alien migrants' are destroying European 'civilization' and its 'ethnic composition', and will eventually 'extinct the white race' (INS 2014b, 22).

The social construction of labour migration of the political rationality of technological modernization without guest workers is based on an intersection of class-based and racialized categories of difference that form the image of non-European migrants as backward subjects. Like the political rationality described above, experts hierarchize labour migrants based on their educational level and professions. However, in contrast to the approach above, class-based categories are closely intertwined with culturalized stereotypes. Immigrants originating from Central Asia are portrayed as a homogeneous group, generally coming from poor, rural areas

with low levels of education and no professional qualifications (INS 2015, 17). They are by no means perceived as human capital in the sense of the above approach. The INS describes people from Central Asia as having an 'agrarian', 'aggressive', 'uncivilized', 'religious', and 'Eastern culture', which is opposed to and incompatible with 'urban', 'secular', and 'developed' Russian society (INS 2014a, 22). Thus, based on the categories of religion, language, tradition, appearance, and demographic trends, an essentializing distinction is drawn between a European 'cultural-civilizational unit' and an 'agrarian Islamic Central Asia'. Together with the class-based hierarchies, this creates a racialized classification into 'positive European migration' and 'negative non-European migration', which determines the legitimacy of labour migration. Non-European immigration generally appears illegitimate because it harms the Russian economy and destroys Russian cultural identity and social stability.

Against this background, a political agenda emerges that advocates strict state control of the entry and residence of labour migrants. One measure proposed by the representatives of this approach is to extend the visa system to the entire post-Soviet space (INS 2014a, 129). Together with this, they suggest introducing a modern border control system with high-tech equipment and border control personnel (INS 2014a, 137). In addition, experts call for the restriction of access to citizenship so that labour migrants cannot stay in the country long term. Overall, experts of this approach favour an immigration policy that creates 'incentives to attract former compatriots to Russia, as well as the Russian-speaking population and groups of migrants who are socially and culturally adapted to the conditions of life in Russia' (FNPR 2021). Existing fast-track procedures for the naturalization of 'compatriots' and 'Russian speakers' should be limited to 'ethnic Russians' and the 'indigenous population' of the Russian Federation belonging to the Russian culture (INS 2014c, 119). The construction of ethnic and cultural belonging to Russia is associated with the category of 'native language'. Only those people who have spoken the Russian language since early childhood and do so

without an accent, verified by professional linguists, are regarded as 'Russian speakers' and 'compatriots' and should be eligible for preferential treatment in citizenship laws (INS 2014c, 120). This is a much narrower understanding of the category of 'compatriot' than the current official definition, which includes all former Soviet citizens and their descendants who identify with the Russian state and culture. On the other hand, regional constraints in the resettlement programme for 'ethnically Russian compatriots' should be removed, and the range of social rights and support should be expanded. In particular, the possibilities for 'Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens' should be developed and a so-called 'Russian card' introduced, which would enable 'reunification with the home country' even without permanent residence in the country, for compatriots living abroad and especially in Ukraine (INS 2014c, 120). In contrast, for 'ethnic non-Russian foreigners', residence requirements for naturalization should be 'radically increased' (INS 2014c, 121).

In sum, the second rationality of migration policy can be understood as an attempt to establish a development path that focuses on the creation of a culturally homogeneous nation and rejects the Western model of diversity. Although radical conservative forces also exist in democracies, constructing 'culturally distant' migration as an essential threat, it appears specific to illiberal regimes that there is no normative counterweight to such political claims. While the determination of borders in democracies is always confronted by the universalist principles of the freedom and equality of all people (Schmalz 2020), no such norm of inclusion exists in authoritarian regimes. As result, political demands for the exclusion of certain social groups such as 'non-Europeans' are contested in authoritarian regimes such as Russia primarily on the economic level and not because they contradict any social values and principles. In this respect, the chance that racist policies will be enforced if they seem economically plausible is much greater here.

Mutual Benefits through Eurasian Integration

Knowledge production of the third identified political rationality is shaped by a strategic alliance of international and local actors, including think tanks, diaspora organizations, international organizations, trade unions, and individual academics. The basic assumption of this political approach is that Russia and the whole post-Soviet region can only 'develop' and remain competitive in the global market if they take advantage of international cooperation between the former Soviet republics. 'The development of our country and the states historically linked to it directly depends on how quickly and effectively we can integrate into a common union in the post-Soviet space' (Postavnin 2012, 30). With these words, Viacheslav Postavnin, head of the think tank Migration in the 21st Century, underpinned the necessity of creating a trans-regional labour market among the former Soviet republics three years before the foundation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The economic benefits of a 'Eurasian centre, which simultaneously defends the influence from the West and the East', have also been stressed by other migration experts, such as Natalia Vlasova and Anatoly Topolin (Vlasova and Topolin 2011, 31), as well as by Sergei Glazev from the conservative think tank Isborsk Club, who emphasizes the 'economic potential of increased competitiveness' within the region (Glazev 2014).

One crucial argument of this approach is that the circulation of labour leads to mutual benefits between labour-sending and labour-receiving countries within the region. For labour-receiving countries, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, a 'common migration space' is expected to contribute to GDP, compensate for population decline and labour shortages, and to provide geopolitical security (Vlasova and Topolin 2011, 34). On the other hand, labour-sending countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, would benefit from 'social remittances' and a 'brain gain' generated by 'brain circulation' (UNDP 2015, 39). Against the background of the demographic developments in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, where the rising 'labour supply' meets a limited

'demand for labour', a trans-regional labour market is seen as a contribution to avoiding high youth unemployment and social unrest (Karabchuk et al. 2015, 69).

This means that, like the other approaches discussed above, the rationality of mutual benefits through Eurasian integration discusses migration against the background of the challenge of global competition. In contrast to the experts mentioned above, however, the representatives of this approach do not seek national solutions but see regional integration and cooperation as a way of dealing with global competition. The approach also reflects uneven relationships within the global market but views Russia as part of a transnational region that is in a peripheral position. Likewise, demographic decline and related labour shortages in Russia are seen in the context of demographic growth in other post-Soviet regions suffering from an oversupply of labour. Thus, this rationality resembles the first rationality in problem diagnosis but opens it up through a trans-regional perspective that leads to different conclusions. The experts of this rationality address development not as an exclusively Russian problem but as a problem of the entire post-Soviet space, in which Russia is part of a complex dynamic.

International organizations are vital in framing labour migration within the development discourse context. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) views labour migration and related remittances as an instrument of 'development', especially in relation to Central Asia, where large-scale migration flows to Russia originate (UNDP 2015, 6). According to the data cited by the UNDP, in 2015 one-third of all migrants in Russia came from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (UNDP 2015, 6). The related financial remittances are seen as substantially contributing to the GDP of these countries and compensating for trade deficits. Moreover, many experts agree that labour migration flows help to reduce poverty because remittances increase family incomes and facilitate the development of small businesses that can create new jobs. In addition, remittances are seen as driving investment in housing and allowing better access to education

and healthcare for the local population (UNDP 2015, 38). Referring to international examples, the Confederation of Trade Unions (VKP) underlines the point that remittances are the most important factor for economic growth in many countries:

> Migrant remittances are one of the best channels for generating national income and, in fact, for solving the problems of improving the living standards of migrant workers and their families. They are an important source of economic growth in modern conditions, supporting the livelihood of 700 million people around the world … Today, they have a greater effect than foreign aid because they go directly to households in need. (VKP 2010, 4)

Especially in times of economic crisis, labour migration and associated remittances are regarded as a financial safety net for the whole region that would be able to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis and, in part, compensate for losses in export revenues from raw materials and goods (Starostin 2017, 63).

The COVID-19 pandemic hit this 'development project' hard. The measures that were taken by the governments of Central Asia and the Russian Federation to flatten the infection curve severely affected 'mobility' in the region. In its study 'The Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Returnees and Stranded Migrants in Central Asia and the Russian Federation', published in March 2021, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) demonstrates the major impact of the disruption of mobility flows for the entire region, particularly pointing to the role of remittances now missing:

> Given the importance of remittances as a share of GDP in many countries of origin, it may seem unsurprising that not only migrants but also their communities are affected by the negative side effects of the COVID-19 crisis and interrupted international labour migration flows. The COVID-19 emergency exacerbates all the pre-existing vulnerabilities of migrants, which may overlap with other factors such as gender, age, and underemployment, and limit opportunities for international migration. (IOM 2021, 2)

Based on a representative survey, the organization showed that COVID-19 severely impacted the number of remittances that could be sent home by labour migrants previously living in Russia. Because many migrants became unemployed or otherwise suffered from declining incomes during the quarantine in the Russian Federation, two out of five respondents were forced to stop sending remittances, with dramatic consequences for their families (IOM 2021, 59). Referring to statistics of the CIS Statistical Committee and the statistical authorities of several countries in the region, the VKP comes to a similar conclusion, stating that 'the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis but also a humanitarian and development crisis that threatens to leave deep social, economic, and political scars for years to come, especially in countries already beset by fragility, poverty, and conflict' (VKP 2021, 9).

Aside from poverty reduction and social stability, experts of this rationality view labour migration as an essential driver of innovation. According to several scholars, the mobility of labour would facilitate innovation, increase the region's competitiveness, and create jobs. It is assumed that labour mobility in the post-Soviet space fosters technological innovation and consequentially drives economic growth. This primarily concerns the mobility of 'qualified specialists', including engineers, technologists, IT specialists, specialists in chemistry and new materials, planners, ecologists, etc. (Vlasova and Topolin 2011, 33). The idea is to pool forces within the Eurasian region to develop innovations in certain hotspots that will keep the area globally competitive. At the same time, however, regionally local actors also work to problematize the weaknesses and dangers of the global and Western-dominated development discourse. In particular, the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCCU) regularly takes a critical stance on the distribution of social rights within a Eurasian mobility area, pointing to inadequate protection of the social rights of labour migrants (VKP 2011). A significant risk of labour migration regarding the development prospects of sending countries, highlighted by some scholars of this approach, is the threat of brain

drain. They warn that the dynamics of the one-sided emigration of young and qualified people could lead to a resource drain in the region. According to Irina Ivakhnyuk, a well-known economist and policy adviser, recruitment strategies of immigration countries that pursue a purely selective policy could economically 'bleed' the weaker economic countries in the region (Ivakhnyuk 2013, 89). She explains that selecting and attracting the best and most talented people undermines the labour and demographic potential of 'donor countries' and leads to an erosion of 'qualified human resources', solidifying 'underdevelopment' and eventually widening the gap in the level of economic advancement (Ivakhnyuk 2013, 88).

As indicated above, economic arguments rationalized by international organizations and local experts to promote a common Eurasian labour market are underpinned by ideas of a common 'culture' and 'civilization' by local experts. According to Vyacheslav Postavnin, regional integration is not just an economic or political question but a matter of a 'common civilization' (Postavnin 2012, 29). Similarly, Sergei Glazev emphasizes the importance of the commonality of historical roots as an ideational foundation alongside economic ideas of interaction, mutual adaptation, and cooperation (Glazev 2014). However, while Glazev implies historical roots and a geographical scope beyond the post-Soviet territory, other experts explicitly refer to Soviet history as the main ideational foundation of regional integration. According to Vlasova and Topolin, historically developed cultural ties among the people living in the post-Soviet space the knowledge of a common (Russian) language, a similar education system, a common mentality and behavioural traits, and a common historical memory build the basis for regional integration (Vlasova and Topolin 2011, 31).

In sum, the political rationality of mutual benefits through Eurasian integration, which advocates regional integration for mutual economic benefits and development, is based on culturalized boundaries grounded in the category of Soviet historical membership. Thus, culturalized ties between former Soviet citizens and their descendants constitute a community of solidarity, which

justifies economic cooperation. In this context, migration within the Eurasian post-Soviet space appears legitimate for economic and cultural reasons. However, despite the economic promises of mutual benefits, global hierarchies between developed and developing countries are evident, manifested in their assigned function as labour-receiving or labour-sending countries. Moreover, highly skilled specialists are distinguished from other labour migrants and praised for their particularly important role in innovation. Thus, despite the commitment to equality, hierarchical boundaries remain prevalent in the rhetoric of this community of experts, raising the question of whether all countries and migrants benefit equally from this political rationality or whether, on the contrary, the rationality reproduces existing economic inequalities within the post-Soviet space, similarly to the approaches discussed above.

From the social construction of labour migration emerges a policy agenda that advocates (1) the creation of a common mobility space, (2) the creation of a single legal space for the common labour market, including guarantees of social protection, and (3) the optimization of remittances as a development tool. The most fundamental goal of this approach is to create and institutionalize a common mobility space in the Eurasian post-Soviet space, facilitating legal mobility and residence throughout the region. However, contrary to the political rationality described above, this approach rejects a selective migration policy designed only for Russian benefit and seeks to prevent possible 'brain drain' by means of 'brain circulation'. Thus, in contrast to the idea of facilitating long-term stays and integration of high-skilled labour, this approach suggests creating 'circular movements' that contribute to the development of emigration countries through social remittances.

Competing Projects of Post-Socialist Development

Based on the analysis above, I argue that the identified political rationalities of labour migration in the Russian expert discourse can be interpreted as competing projects of 'post-socialist

development'. As the comparison shows, each identified rationality assigns a specific role to labour migration in achieving economic growth and progress. At the same time, they appear as strategies for coping with significant challenges that accompany Russia's post-socialist integration into global capitalism. Such challenges include a substantial demographical decline, international competition, and Russia's peripheral position in the global capitalist market. Each rationality, however, draws different conclusions about how to address these challenges in the context of migration policy and, against this backdrop, justifies specific models of political regulation.

The first and most dominant rationality of the Russian expert discourse, global competitiveness through selective recruitment, views large-scale labour migration as a necessary condition for and engine of Russia's future economic growth and development. In the light of demographic decline and the low degree of automation in many production areas, the approach presents labour migration as the only way to prevent labour shortages and remain competitive in the global market. Thus, labour migration appears to be part of a development strategy that seeks economic growth and global competitiveness by exploiting cheap labour. Meagre labour costs make it possible to attract foreign investment, realize large-scale infrastructure projects, and increase overall competitiveness in international markets. At the same time, this enables the social mobility of the native population, which can outsource the poorly paid, heavy, dangerous, and prestige-less work.

This strategy must be seen against the background of Russia's relatively weak economic position on the world market, where Russia has struggled to keep pace in the face of advanced Western technologies on the one hand and cheap consumer goods from emerging market economies on the other (Neunhöffer and Schüttpelz 2002, 391). Due to its own comparatively low level of technologization and innovation, Russia could not significantly increase productivity and efficiency to be globally competitive. Instead, in the 2000s, the strength of the Russian economy was based primarily on oil and gas resources (Akindinova, Kuzminov, and Yasin

2014, 44). After 2012, however, this growth model faltered 'due to the cessation of growth in hydrocarbon prices and the stabilization in physical volumes of external fuel deliveries' (Akindinova, Kuzminov, and Yasin 2014, 44). Overall, Russia appears to be located on the periphery of the global capitalist centres as a competitor with unequal opportunities. This provides the context for the perceived need to lower production costs and attract foreign investment to strengthen its competitiveness. As experts repeatedly emphasize, highly qualified specialists would be necessary to develop the Russian economy. However, the Russian economy is not proving to be competitive with the global capitalist centres, which appear much more attractive to migrant workers than Russia and even draw away Russia's own (high-qualified) citizens.

Against this background, the political rationality of global competitiveness through selective recruitment appears as an attempt to compensate Russia's peripheral global position by building on its post-imperial status, which allows Russia to extract labour migration as a kind of resource from its periphery. However, this strategy comes with the risk of jeopardizing social cohesion and stability through the influx of labour migrants. This creates a massive dilemma within this first political rationality of migration. Russia must rely on foreign labour and, in the future, labour that is seen as culturally alien to remain competitive but must then expect resistance from the population that could severely affect the stability of the authoritarian-ruled country.

This problem constellation gives rise to a political project that attempts to recruit only economically necessary migrants through selective recruitment and integrate them according to economic and social necessities. In this way, the approach resembles the Western guest worker model. However, instead of imitating Western experiences as was the case in the 1990s, experts call for selective learning from the experienced migration countries and adaptation to local conditions. The development project also shows certain continuities with Soviet mobility policies but modifies them and adapts them to current conditions. For example, it borrows from the Soviet model of 'organized recruiting' and tries

to combine it with Western point systems. Culturally, the development project ties in with the Soviet legacy by postulating a cultural closeness of post-Soviet migrants and Russian citizens, although cultural differences based on language, religion, and appearance are assumed. However, cultural difference is not essentialized but is seen as a changeable social component (e.g., through integration policies). However, unlike in the Soviet model, the notion of cultural proximity is valued exclusively in terms of economic benefits, for instance because less resistance from the Russian population is assumed in the case of culturally close migration. In this respect, this development project is more reminiscent of Western diversity management (de Jong 2016). Integration is primarily seen in terms of economic exploitability and avoidance of societal disruption rather than as a means of creating emancipatory and democratic structures in a pluralist society. Accordingly, an opening of national boundaries occurs only under the condition of economic utility. Class-based differences are thus the decisive category for the constitution of social order and hierarchies.

The second political rationality, technological modernization without guest workers, denies a positive correlation between labour migration and economic growth and represents non-European migration as a significant 'civilizational threat' to Russian culture. Considering liberal migration policy as a severe obstacle to technological modernization, it supports political measures that control and constrain 'culturally alien migration' and instead facilitates the immigration of 'ethnic Russians'. Unlike the first rationality, this development project does not see demographic change as the fundamental problem of development. Instead, it problematizes Russia's labour-intensive mode of production and technological backwardness, which would account for its lack of competitiveness.

The second rationality also problematizes contemporary Russia's peripheral global position. While the first approach accepts this position to some extent and seeks to balance it by utilizing its own periphery, the perception of this peripheral position within this approach challenges Russia's self-image as a great power.

Experts of this rationality position Russia within global hierarchies at the level of the Global North and firmly distinguish it from the Global South. Therefore, in this approach, it seems necessary to overcome the peripheral position by catching up technologically. The invitation of guest workers is seen as an obstacle here, since it would prevent incentives within the economy to modernize the mode of production and thus cements technological backwardness.

Cultural boundaries are an integral part of this development project. They are closely linked to economic hierarchies, resulting in the binary classification of a 'developed Christian European civilization' versus an 'underdeveloped Islamic non-European civilization'. Thus, this development project is decisively opposed to official Soviet ideas of internationalism and friendship of the people, as well as Western ideas of multiculturalism. Based on essentializing, racializing demarcations between non-European and European populations, it rather ties in to racist discourses the origins of which can be located in postcolonial Europe (Gilroy 2016). From this perspective, the integration of 'culturally alien' migrants seems impossible and, therefore, a pointless financial burden on the public purse. According to this approach, it is more important to encourage and support the immigration of 'ethnic Russians'. National boundaries are thus narrowed down to race and ethnicity, which is justified both economically and culturally.

Finally, the third political rationality, mutual benefits through Eurasian integration, points to the beneficial role of labour migration in developing the entire post-Soviet region. Given uneven economic and demographic trends in the region, this approach views labour migration as a lucrative way for both sending and receiving countries to solve related socioeconomic problems and advocates political measures that facilitate circular mobility and prevent selective recruitment. Like the first rationality, this approach considers the demographic change in Russia as a problem for the labour market and thus for the country's development. Likewise, it problematizes a peripheral position within global competitive relations. However, this rationality broadens the view

of the entire post-Soviet region, the economic and social integration of which would bring competitive advantages in the global market. This takes up an idea already relevant during the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, when workers from Central Asia were recruited to Russia to compensate for demographic imbalances within the Soviet Union (Abashin 2014, 11).

However, a more robust link can be drawn to current Western development narratives. It mainly reflects a discourse referred to in the literature as the migration–development nexus, which has been applied to regions of the Global South for some time by international organizations such as the World Bank (see, e.g., Faist 2010). According to this, circular international migration would trigger development dynamics in emigration countries of the Global South through financial remittances, human capital and knowledge flows, and social remittances (Faist 2010, 70). In contrast to the political rationality of global competitiveness through selective recruitment, migrants in this neoliberal discourse are not only understood as a 'resource' to be appropriated but are invoked as active subjects and 'managers' of development (Schwertl 2015, 23). This neoliberal invocation is accompanied primarily by the idea of responsibility for the country of origin and not, as Maria Schwertl critically notes, by the assurance of political and social rights (Schwertl 2015, 23).

The dominance of Western narratives in this approach is not surprising, since international organizations such as the IOM, the World Bank, and the UNDP are central actors of knowledge production within it. In addition, the political rationality is normatively underpinned by local actors tying in with official Soviet ideas of internationalism and the friendship of the people. From this perspective, the borders of the nation state lose their significance for feelings of belonging. However, the expansion of cultural boundaries remains limited to the Eurasian post-Soviet space. Furthermore, the question arises regarding the extent to which the reproduced dichotomous classifications of sending and receiving countries, as well as of highly skilled and low-skilled

migrants, are capable of overcoming systematic imbalances in the region.

In summary, all three political rationalities design specific strategies in the context of migration policy debates to cope with the economic challenges arising from Russia's post-socialist transformation and integration into global capitalism. The individual rationalities not only constitute specific social constructions of labour migration but at the same time map out broader social projects in terms of economic development, its political regulation, and the relationship between state, economy, and society. Since these projects differ fundamentally in terms of their goals, I speak of competing projects of post-socialist development.

As I have attempted to show, these projects are closely linked to a specific global positioning. The first rationality reflects a post-imperial position within the post-Soviet space to cope with the simultaneous peripheral position vis-à-vis the global centres of capitalism. Its normative reference point is Western immigration states, even though a modification and adaptation of Western models to regional specifics is called for. The global positioning can therefore be aptly described, in Morozov's words, as a 'subaltern empire' (Morozov 2015). The second model identifies Russia as a 'great power' in crisis the status of which needs to be regained through a process of catch-up modernization. Russia is seen within global hierarchies as a 'developed civilization', in distinction to the 'underdeveloped' Global South. Although there is an identification with a postcolonial Western discourse, there is at the same time a normative separation from the (contemporary) West and the associated ideas of diversity and pluralism. The third rationality locates Russia as part of the Eurasian post-Soviet region, which is seen as an integrated unit between the East and West in the global order. Western ideas of development are adopted, although critical voices of local actors regarding the dangers of interregional imbalances and hierarchies can also be detected. Overall, it becomes apparent that the West has long since ceased to be an undisputed point of reference for post-socialist development.

Moreover, all three economic rationalities are linked to ideas of cultural belonging and a reflection of national boundaries, showing different references to the Soviet legacy of 'multinationality' (Brubaker 1994), ranging from clear distinction to reactivation of Soviet ideas of membership. The first rationality refers positively to the historically developed connections within the post-Soviet space. However, it is aimed primarily at increasing national competitiveness through cheap and available labour resources and the outsourcing of unwanted precarious work to guest workers. An expansion of national boundaries takes place only under the condition of the economic usability of migrants. In contrast, the second rationality rejects any sense of belonging beyond national borders and pushes for a political institutionalization of ethnic boundaries to achieve technological and economic progress. The third rationality reactivates Soviet-rooted ideas of membership to develop a competitive community. It criticizes national solo efforts at the expense of the post-Soviet periphery and stresses the economic advantages of trans-regional solidarity.

Against this background, the different migration policy positions can also be understood as expressions of a society searching for and fighting about its global and cultural coordinates in post-socialist times. They are a manifestation of a specific global positioning and historical experience that cannot be directly transferred to other post-socialist societies. Nonetheless, the Russian case provides some indications of how current migration policy conflicts are related to societal challenges arising from the economic and cultural transformation and the new geopolitical constellations of former socialist societies. In particular, demographic change and the associated shortage of skilled workers combined with emigration dynamics towards the West pose a massive challenge for most post-socialist states, which also influences how immigration is discussed in the respective societies (Krastev 2017).

Conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated that, as in democracies, migration is a contested political field in authoritarian Russia. Liberal political projects of opening are opposed to radical projects of closing. In particular, liberal Western-oriented rationalities are at odds with anti-Western nationalist projects.

Based on this analysis, the chapter concludes that the contradictory character of Russian migration policy is by no means merely an effect of the clientelist nature of the Russian state, in which corrupt political elites use migration as a resource in informal patronage networks. Instead, it argues that the conflicts and contradictions of Russian migration policy can be interpreted as an expression of a society that is renegotiating its post-socialist coordinates in economic, cultural, and global terms within a changing and increasingly challenged post-Cold War world order. At the same time, there is a close connection between migration policy and the authoritarian regime in Russia, as Putin's increasingly authoritarian and now dictatorial regime has increasingly restricted the possibilities for debate and dialogue between state and social experts since 2014. This has marginalized economically liberal social visions for the Russian state, which were still being discussed in the early 2010s under the banner of 'conservative modernization' in strategic partnership with the West, and which also had a decisive influence on the regulation of migration policy. Today's apparent consensus on neo-imperial expansion, an absolute break with the West, and the attempt to establish Russia as a military and 'sovereign' great power is therefore still comparatively new. And this also explains some of the contradictions of Russian migration policy, in which the neoliberal footprint of Western-oriented migration experts is still visible, but the agenda of which is fundamentally undermined by the neo-imperial aspirations of the current political regime.

Notes

1 The chapter is based on a chapter of my dissertation 'Migration Policy and the Post-Socialist Condition: The Role of Experts in Forming Russia's Contradictory Migration Policy under Authoritarian Rule' (Glathe 2023).

2 The concept of 'political rationalities' originally goes back to Foucault's lectures on 'governmentality' from 1978–1979, in which he pointed out the close relationship between power and forms of knowledge (Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2010).

3 The data analysis was guided by the method of qualitative content analysis (QCA). At the centre of data analysis using QCA is the so-called 'coding frame', a set of categories through which to organize comparisons between observations (Dey 1993, 103). It usually consists of several 'main categories' indicating relevant aspects of the research object, and 'sub-categories' for each main category specifying the relevant meaning concerning this aspect (Schreier 2012, 61). As main categories, the different logics of the social construction of migration were taken from the literature: the 'economization', 'securitization', and 'humanitarization' of migration. As sub-categories, these were then assigned four dimensions of the social construction process, which I abstracted on the basis of the literature: (a) problematization of migration; (b) categories and classifications of migrant groups; (c) principles of evaluating the legitimacy of migration; and (d) positions regarding the political regulation of migration. The coding frame allowed me to organize the vast amount of data and enabled comparison between different types of text. This procedure was realized with the help of the software MAXQDA.

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CHAPTER 5

Legal Approaches to Migration and Electoral Rights

The Experience of Russia

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the impact of global migration on approaches towards electoral rights in Russia. Specifically, it focuses on the implications of the reactionary attitudes towards migration of labour and capital ('othering') for the legal regulation of elections and perceptions of electoral behaviour in Russia. The chapter addresses the existing gap in the legal and political science scholarship by applying an interdisciplinary approach and taking regional context into the account.

Keywords: migration, Russia, electoral rights, illiberal regimes, internal migration, dual citizenship, electoral legislation

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the impact of global migration on approaches towards electoral rights in post-Soviet societies. Specifically, it will focus on the implications of reactionary attitudes towards migration of labour and capital ('othering') for the legal regulation of elections and perceptions of electoral behaviour in Russia. The chapter will address the existing gap in the legal and political science scholarship by applying an interdisciplinary approach and taking into account the regional context. This context is fundamentally shaped by the illiberal regimes in Russia (on both federal and sub-national levels) and many of its neighbouring states. The illiberal character of a regime is particularly visible in its practical approaches to electoral democracy. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way argue in their seminal work (Levitsky and Way 2012, 5), '[s]uch regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents'. The unevenness of the political arena is thus one of the key determinants for illiberal regimes. Therefore, viewing them through the lens of electoral rights is important for understanding these regimes' functioning.

In this chapter, mobility is understood as encompassing both internal (i.e. between different regions of the country) and external (i.e. between different countries) migration. International human rights regimes do not provide definitive guidance in terms of the territorial locus of democratic entitlement. While migrants cannot be excluded from most civic rights, the rights to vote and to be elected remain firmly rooted in nationality and residence. This universal contradiction becomes especially pronounced in places like North Eurasia that have experienced political upheaval and mass labour migration. At the same time, such places often witness significant capital flight, with political and financial elites becoming firmly rooted in foreign jurisdictions.

I argue that in the case of Russia, these processes result in the twin othering of migration by an illiberal regime. While migrants

from poorer countries and areas within the state are seen as potential 'objects' of manipulation, members of the political elite are suspected of 'dual loyalty'. The othering is reflected in the legislation, which shapes the participation of the respective categories in the electoral procedures. Thus, the state enables the electoral participation of groups that it deems loyal while restricting that of those it views as unreliable. For instance, the state facilitates voting by military personnel with tenable connections to local politics while disenfranchizing other categories of internal migrants. Migration also shapes the contours of the political elite itself. Dual citizens and, in some cases, also long-term residents of foreign countries are excluded from elected office. This removes those with suspected dual loyalty from the political system, which emphasizes state sovereignty. The instrumental role of migration status in electoral legislation is arguably in tune with the perceptions of the public. Therefore, some measures to facilitate voting by migrants (e.g. expanded early voting) may also be seen as tools to undermine election integrity. This is due to the public being used to electoral law being shaped for partisan ends. This suspicion is sometimes shared even by independent-minded judges at the apex courts.

The chapter will study the effects of this othering by analysing the two key determinants of electoral rights—the 'active' right to vote and the 'passive' right to be elected. It will map the restrictions on those rights due to dual citizenship, residence, and other factors incidental to migration. It will then locate them in the legal framework produced through the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The study will also deal with how othering shapes popular perceptions of election integrity, limiting even the existing legal channels of democratic empowerment for migrants.

Migration and the 'Active' Element of Electoral Rights

External Migration

The traumatic Russian history of the twentieth century produced several waves of emigration from the country. Post-1991 Russia also became a major destination country for immigrants. In the 1990s and early 2000s, most of them were ethnic Russians leaving other former Soviet republics. That wave of immigration allowed Russia to largely offset the negative demographic trends of the decade. From the mid-2000s the patterns of immigration changed. Following the rebound of the Russian economy, workers from former Soviet republics would increasingly seek temporary employment in the country. According to United Nations Population Division data (UN 2024), Russia maintained a positive migration balance of several hundred thousand from 1990 onwards, before registering its first ever negative migration rate in 2023 (UN 2024).

ECtHR case law accepts a variety of approaches towards diaspora voting rights. There is no universal entitlement to vote for those outside their country of citizenship. Some countries may altogether deny an opportunity to vote abroad (*Sitaropoulos and Giakoumopoulos v. Greece*, 2012, 70–80) while others can disenfranchise expatriates after a certain period (*Shindler v. the United Kingdom*, 2013, 107–118). Yet once a state does decide to hold elections abroad, it cannot use logistical hurdles as a pretext for restricting electoral rights (*Riza and Others v. Bulgaria*, 2015).

Often it is those countries with large and politically influential diasporas that disenfranchise their expatriates. Examples include Greece and Ireland. Others, in contrast, acknowledge the diaspora's clout and develop intricate mechanisms not only to enfranchise expatriates but also to ensure their representation in the legislature. Examples of this approach include France and Italy, both of which have constituencies designed to represent expatriate voters. Russia, despite the significant number of expatriate citizens, fits neither model. This may be a consequence of historical experiences.

During the Soviet era, emigration without state permission was treated as a form of treason.[1] Emigration with state permission would usually result in withdrawal of citizenship. Thus, the diaspora and the state were separate from each other. In the 1990s the relationship between the two dramatically thawed. Yet rather than an independent force, the diaspora was viewed by the state as a source of human resources and as an instrument of the projection of 'soft power'. This approach was spelled out in the Federal Law on State Policy towards Compatriots, adopted in 1999. The goals of the policy were stipulated as protecting compatriots' interests abroad and encouraging them to return to Russia (Federal Law of 24 May 1999, No. 99-FZ, Article 5). Therefore, the diaspora had no recognized political interests within the country. Indeed, its interaction with state institutions mostly happened through advisory councils of federal executive bodies, where members of the diaspora were incorporated (Federal Law of 24 May 1999, No. 99-FZ, Preamble). This kind of interaction presupposed a non-political orientation. The passive role of the diaspora was further entrenched with a shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy in the late 2000s and 2010s. In 2003, Vladimir Putin famously referred to the breakup of the Soviet Union as 'the greatest geopolitical disaster in history'. This statement signified a shift towards challenging the post-Soviet territorial arrangements. Such a challenge effectively blurred the distinction between citizens and non-citizens within a diaspora. Cultural characteristics (e.g. speaking the Russian language) often became no less important than citizenship. Thus, the political participation of the diaspora became secondary to other policy goals.

The manner of holding elections abroad reflects this general policy. Both electoral law and the practical policies of Russian diplomatic missions facilitate expatriate voting. However, laws are framed in such a way as to dilute the effects of the foreign votes, giving them little effect on election outcomes. The federal electoral laws adopted in 1994–1995 (the framework law and the laws on presidential and parliamentary elections) stipulated that expatriates had full electoral rights. The framework law further

obliged Russian diplomatic and consular representations to facilitate their voting (Federal Law of 6 December 1994, No. 56-FZ, Article 3). Yet in practice, expatriate electoral rights were limited to federal elections. Regional and local elections were tied to residency registration (see the section on internal migration below) while expatriates abroad were obliged to deregister themselves in Russia. Thus, the relevant authorities made no effort to allow expatriates to vote in local and regional elections. The subsequent federal framework law adopted in 1997 recognized this reality. The provision of the law clarified that expatriates had full electoral rights only in federal elections. The relevant practices remained in force until 2011 when the new consular rules entered into force. The situation changed only in 2019. With the introduction of online voting in some regions, voters registered there were now able to cast their votes from abroad. However, the integrity of online voting is highly questionable (see the section on internal migration below).

Between 1993 and 2003 and again from 2016, the State Duma (the lower house of the federal parliament) was constituted on the basis of the parallel voting system. This meant that half of its members were elected in single-member majoritarian districts. The 1995 federal law on the State Duma specified that expatriate voters were to be assigned to districts by a decision of the Central Election Commission (Federal Law of 21 June 1995, No. 90-FZ, Article 12). The number of expatriates in any given district could not exceed 10 per cent. Thus, legislators were keen to dilute the potential influence of voters abroad. The provision was reproduced in the subsequent laws adopted in 1999 (Federal Law of 24 June 1999, No. 121-FZ, Article 12) and 2014 (Federal Law of 22 February 2014, No. 20-FZ, Article 12). However, this limitation is somewhat mitigated by the procedure of expatriate count, which is based on consular registries. Since 2011, such registries have been mostly voluntary (Federal Law of 5 July 2010, No. 154-FZ, Article 17; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 17 August 2011, Order No. 15114). Therefore, the actual percentage of expatriate voters could be higher.

Human rights standards and international documents that pertain to immigrants avoid granting them electoral rights (Thym 2014, 137). Indeed, the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights firmly roots these rights in citizenship. Therefore, allowing foreign citizens to vote in elections is within the state's discretion. Since 1999, Russian legislation (Federal Law of 30 March 1999, No. 55-FZ, Article 1) has envisaged the possibility of enfranchising certain categories of foreigners in local elections based on international treaties. The legislative amendments reflected treaties that Russia signed with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, which granted the respective countries' citizens reciprocal political rights. The treaty with Kazakhstan has since lapsed, and there is a debate (Belousova 2019) in the Russian academic legal literature on whether the treaty with Kyrgyzstan still gives political rights to its citizens. Currently, citizens of Belarus can vote for local councils and in local referenda while Turkmenistan citizens are enfranchised in all local elections and referenda (Vestnik Migranta 2021). However, actual participation in elections has several caveats. Foreign citizens must possess a permanent residence permit and be registered in the relevant locality (Vestnik Migranta 2021). Even then, voter registration is not automatic but has to be applied for at the local election commission. These limitations, compounded by the lack of interest in local elections, result in negligible foreign participation in local elections. The most current data available is for 2009, when less than three dozen foreigners took part (Belousova 2019, 66).

This fact did not prevent commentators from speculating about the potential impact of migrant voting. They emphasized the potential for electoral malpractice and even the 'dominance of ethnic minority communities' (Newsland 2013). There is little impetus in Russian society to grant immigrants effective political representation at any level of the government. Such an approach reflects the general attitudes within the framework of an illiberal regime. External migrants are seen primarily through an economic lens, rather than from a political or human rights perspective. Of

course, the granting of electoral rights to non-citizens is rather rare (except in the European Union states, where it is stipulated by primary law). However, the peculiarity of the Russian case is the fact that the existing channels of non-citizen political participation seem underused.

The electoral rights of Russian expatriates largely reflect the state policy towards the diaspora. For a long time, the diaspora was seen as a large pool of potential immigrants and as a means of projecting soft power. Beyond that, however, it lacked any independent political role. Therefore, electoral law grants expatriates the almost unconditional right to vote in federal elections but dilutes their votes by mixing them with those from within Russia. International treaties and Russian legislation grant franchise in local elections to nationals of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan with permanent residence in Russia. However, in practice this right is little advertised and rarely exercised. This situation aligns with the general othering of immigrants in Russian political life, which is characteristic across the political spectrum.

Internal Migration

In contrast to the situation in many other countries, access to voting in Russia is often more difficult for internal migrants than for expatriates. The reason behind this is a cumbersome practice of residency registration, still referred to as 'propiska'. This was a Soviet practice whereby internal migration could be restricted by administrative discretion.[2] It was introduced in 1932 to regulate peasants moving into large cities and to expel undesirable elements. Despite the rapid post-1945 urbanization, propiska was maintained until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The system allowed the exclusion of former convicts from living in major population centres. It also imposed additional restrictions on taking up residency in select areas, including Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, Crimea, and Caucasian resorts. The Soviet 'proto-constitutional court' (Committee of Constitutional Oversight) in 1990 noted serious deficiencies in propiska regulations before ruling

them unconstitutional a year later. The Committee had explicitly proposed changing the discretion-based system into one based on notification. The decision of the Committee was pronounced mere months before the Soviet Union ceased its existence. Thus, propiska remained an influential concept, both in legal and in political terms. Suffice it to say that in nearly all the former Soviet republics, citizenship was determined based on propiska at the time of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Russia was no exception, granting citizenship to every Soviet citizen with propiska on the Russian territory on 8 February 1992. Therefore, propiska retained an outsized presence in the popular conscience as a device for regulating migration. Even though it was abolished over 30 years ago, the term is still used as a synonym for the 'citizen registration' currently in place.

The current registration regime in Russia was introduced on 1 October 1993 by the Law on the Freedom of Movement. On paper, the new registration policy was not very different from those in many Western countries (including, for example, Finland). In a crucial difference from the Soviet propiska, the new policy left local officials with no administrative discretion to deny registration. Nor did it oblige those lacking registration to leave the locality.[3] Some regions and cities chose, however, to institute more stringent registration requirements than the federal ones. For instance, Stavropol territory instituted a limit on how many internal migrants could be registered in certain localities. In effect, this reproduced the propiska regime abolished in 1991. The territory, along with the city of Moscow and the Moscow region, obliged internal migrants to pay hefty dues as a precondition for obtaining registration. In the city of Moscow that due equalled five thousand times the minimum wage.

In April 1996, the federal Constitutional Court found these regional norms unconstitutional (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1997, Judgement No. 9-P). Specifically, the Court noted that the regions acted *ultra vires* in restricting constitutionally protected rights, including the right to vote and to be elected. In 1998, the Court simplified the registration regime

by finding unconstitutional a six-month limitation on temporary registration and removing administrative discretion in denying registration (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1998, Judgement No. 4-P).[4] The requirements were further relaxed in 2004 when the federal government removed the obligation to register temporary stays of under 90 days (unless staying in organized accommodation). Despite these liberalizations (and even, to some extent, due to them), the registration regime is not particularly effective in regulating internal migration. Its principal weakness lies in a mismatch with an unregulated rental housing market. The registration policy is largely dependent on the cooperation of landlords. However, they have little incentive to comply, as doing so would expose them to tax liability. Nonetheless, despite its practical inefficiency, registration retains an important place in the government discourse. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for the Soviet propiska, as in the popular conscience. For instance, then-prime minister Vladimir Putin explicitly referred to the norms of the Soviet Criminal Code concerning propiska when proposing the criminalization of irregular internal migration and even the expulsion of irregular migrants (President of Russia 2010). Eventually, these ideas were realized by making landlords criminally liable for fictitious registration of both internal migrants and foreign immigrants (Federal Law of 21 December 2013, No. 376-FZ).[5] Notably, the penalties were identical, regardless of whether the impugned actions concerned foreigners or Russian citizens. Therefore, the legislator considered external and internal migrations similar 'threats'.

The law regulating resident registration directly stipulated that lack of registration was not permissible grounds for restricting electoral rights. That said, both the state structure and electoral system meant that this could not be completely true. The federal law setting the basic guarantees of electoral rights (Federal Law of 6 December 1994, No. 56-FZ, Article 8) stipulated that a citizen was to be assigned to an electoral precinct based on resident registration. It provided no alternatives for proving de facto residency. The same pattern was reproduced in federal electoral laws

adopted in 1997 (Federal Law of 19 September 1997, No. 124-FZ, Article 17) and 2002 (Federal Law of 12 June 2002, No. 67-FZ, Article 16). In this way, resident registration became a proxy for realizing the active element of electoral rights. The issues connected with the functioning of the resident registration system therefore had a direct bearing on the ability of individuals to vote.

In some cases, the residency registration helped voters who would otherwise be disenfranchised. For instance, in February 1995 the electoral commission of the Republic of North Ossetia made a ruling which excluded military personnel and internally displaced persons from voter rolls. This ruling has to be read in the context of the Ossetia–Ingush conflict, which led to the displacement of nearly 50 thousand people (Human Rights Watch 1996). The situation made it to the federal Constitutional Court, which established a violation of the Constitution. The Court ruled that residency registration was sufficient for inclusion on voter rolls, regardless of where the person was. The Court even held that election results in districts affected by the disenfranchisement could be overruled (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1995, Judgement No. 14-P).

Both the 1997 and the 2002 laws stipulated that citizens were entitled to vote anywhere in the constituent entity where they resided. In the federal elections (to the presidency and the State Duma) a similar opportunity exists throughout the national territory. However, the procedure for exercising this opportunity remained for a long time cumbersome. A person wishing to vote in another electoral precinct had to notify their electoral commission in advance and obtain a special slip. That slip then could be used in another precinct. The procedure was better suited to the needs of short-term travellers than those of internal migrants. For the latter group, the hassle of going back to their formal residence to obtain a slip could have been excessive. Furthermore, the procedure would be unavailable for regional and local elections if an internal migrant resided outside of their region of registration. One group which benefited from the procedure was unscrupulous politicians, who used it to boost the numbers of (often pressured)

loyal voters. For instance, during the 2007 legislative elections in the Pskov region over 1,500 voters were given slips to boost a specific slate of candidates within a party list (Nacionalnyi Centr Monitoringa Demokraticheskikh Procedur 2007). Furthermore, there were multiple instances where slips were not returned by voters (Kynev 2011). This allowed for repeat voting, which meant even greater possibilities for manipulating election outcomes. Civic election observers noted cases where employers pressured their subordinates into obtaining slips so that they would vote at a selected polling place (presumably to pressure them into voting for a particular candidate). Observers also noted an ever-growing number of slips received by electoral commissions in federal elections in the 2000s. Their number grew from 1.6 million in the 2003 State Duma election to 2.6 million in the 2008 presidential election. Of those, 600,000 were given in 2003, compared with 2 million in 2008 (Golos 2016).

The procedure was dramatically improved in 2018 when the slips became virtual. Citizens were now able to obtain them through the government electronic services portal, Gosuslugi. At least in the federal elections, this removed the primary obstacle for internal migrants to exercise the right to vote. Given the relative ease of the new rules, they proved unsurprisingly popular. In the 2018 presidential election, over 5.5 million Russian citizens applied to vote outside their place of residence.[6] A further expansion of opportunities for internal migrants came with the introduction of online voting in 2019–2021. The option was first introduced in the Moscow City Duma (regional legislature) election in September 2019. Then its use expanded to the federal level—in two regions during the 2020 constitutional referendum, and in seven during the 2021 State Duma elections. Since its introduction in the 2019 Moscow elections, many election watchers have raised concerns over the conduct of online voting. These concerns grew after the 2021 State Duma vote, when online votes reversed the victories of several opposition candidates in the city of Moscow. Election watchers believed that the online votes had been manipulated. There are further claims that employees at state-owned

enterprises and organizations were pressured to vote online and report to their bosses on how they had voted.

These claims underscore the deep tension between accommodating the electoral rights of internal migrants and protecting election integrity. Measures that facilitate the ability to vote without residency registration can also enable electoral fraud. The tension is present in most aspects of the relevant regulation. In the long run, this leads to the othering of certain groups seen as easy prey by those manipulating elections. These groups can include employees of public institutions and state-owned companies, military personnel, and industrial workers. The othering is helped by the actions of government figures. For instance, in the wake of the 2011–2012 post-election protests, pro-government forces mobilized industrial workers against protesters, portrayed as urban elites. This divide was largely artificial. In Russia, opposition support was not limited to urban centres. Moreover, opposition supporters in large cities were often internal migrants. Thus, accommodating their electoral rights would not result in facilitating electoral malpractice. However, the artificial political divide prevents a genuine discussion of internal migrants' electoral rights. No attempt has ever been made to consider if there are other ways to confirm substantial links with a particular locality beyond residency registration. For instance, the eligibility to vote in a particular locality (constituent entity and unit of self-government) could have been determined based on employment or taxation. Using such determinants would have aligned legislative requirements with the de facto situation. Furthermore, taxation and employment are objective criteria for establishing the sufficiency of connection with a particular locality. Yet instead, discussions over accommodating internal migration in election law have a mostly formalistic character. While authorities tend to interpret residency registration requirements liberally when it suits their interests, election integrity advocates argue for stricter scrutiny. None of them, however, question the validity of using residency registration as a basis for electoral rights. Two cases seem instructive in this regard.

The first case concerns military voters. The 1997 and 2002 federal laws stipulated that soldiers and officers were to be registered in their respective military units by their commanders. They were entitled to vote in all elections, except for conscript soldiers in local elections. Given the size of some military units, they could have had an outsized weight in local elections. One could question, however, if military voters (given the extraterritorial nature of their service) have a sufficient connection to a self-government unit. Precisely this argument led the Constitutional Court to uphold the exclusion of conscripts from local elections. The Court argued that voters needed to establish a sufficient connection with the municipality, which conscripts lacked (Decision No. 151-O, Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1998). The issue of military voters next came before the Constitutional Court in 2016, following a dispute over the validity of a municipal election in St Petersburg. It concerned one of the smallest municipalities within the city, with a population of just under 7,000. At the same time, the municipality housed the headquarters of the Western Military District and the regional command of the National Guard. This gave military voters a very significant weight in the municipality. Two individual voters challenged the inclusion of their military counterparts. They claimed that although military voters were registered in their military unit, they did not reside in the municipality. Therefore, they should not have been entitled to vote in the election. Unlike in 1998, the Court displayed a more formalist reading of the law. The judges affirmed that the federal law was meant to enfranchise military voters and thus did not violate the constitutional rights of other voters (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 2016, Decision No. 337-O). At the same time, federal legislators were not precluded from changing the manner of participation of military voters in local elections (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 2016, Decision No. 337-O). Thus, in effect, the Constitutional Court avoided considering the merits of the case.

Another instance when the voting rights of internal migrants came before the Constitutional Court concerned early voting. The

1994 federal law provided for this in cases where a voter expects to be outside of their place of residence on election day (Federal Law of 6 December 1994, No. 56-FZ, Article 30). The 1997 federal law allowed early voting in cases where no provisions existed for slips allowing a person to vote in another precinct (Federal Law 19 September 1997, No. 124-FZ, of Article 53). The 1999 amendments obliged voters to give a specific reason to an electoral commission when wishing to vote early (Federal Law of 30 March 1999, No. 55-FZ). The 2002 federal law further limited early voting to local elections (Federal Law of 12 June 2002, No. 67-FZ, Article 65). Election integrity advocates have long noted irregularities in the conduct of early voting. They were concerned about the lack of observation during the process, allowing unscrupulous election commission members to engage in machinations. In 2010, early voting was effectively abolished by amendments introduced by then-president Dmitry Medvedev. Citing the experience of electoral malpractice, he left in place only the provisions relating to early voting in remote areas (Federal Law of 31 May 2010, No. 112-FZ; see also Pravo.ru 2010). Postal voting was offered as a possible alternative, but only a few regions introduced it, and even there it proved unpopular among voters. (Rambler 2020) Already in 2014, the legislative assembly of Vladimir region challenged the constitutionality of the law abolishing early voting. Their argumentation centred on the plight of internal migrants. During the hearings in the Constitutional Court, the counsel for the legislative assembly noted that over 35,000 of the region's inhabitants were working daily in Moscow. The ban on early voting was, in his opinion, unfair as it provided no exceptions in situations of work-related or holiday trips, illness, and other life circumstances (Vladimir-SMI 2014). The Constitutional Court agreed, determining that alternatives such as absentee slips or postal voting were not sufficient. It cited 'internal labour migration' among the factors necessitating early voting. To decide otherwise, went the judgment, was to force citizens to choose between the right to work and the right to vote. The abolition of early voting was thus found unconstitutional (Constitutional Court of the Russian

Federation 2014, Judgement No. 11-P). One cannot help but note the formalistic approach of the Constitutional Court. If a person works in another region, it may be the centre of their life interests, regardless of residency registration in another region. Furthermore, by working in a particular region, a person has a vested interest in the regulation adopted at the regional level. Rather than argue for early voting, the Court could have used this opportunity to question the state of the residency registration and to propose ways of aligning the right to work with the right to vote. Even the two dissenting judges (Sergey Kazantsev and Yury Danilov) did not use this opportunity, rather underscoring the legitimacy of abolishing early voting to safeguard election integrity. Interestingly, one of the judges (Kazantsev) claimed that early voting had been abused to facilitate votes by the military, civil servants, pensioners, and employees of state-owned enterprises. Again, certain groups of the population seemed suspicious from the standpoint of election integrity.

The suspicions, however, were not without merit. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, early voting was massively expanded, leading to substantial deterioration in the quality of the electoral process. Voting in the 2020 constitutional referendum (officially billed as the 'All-Russia vote') stretched for a week and the 2021 State Duma election lasted for three days. In both cases, election observers encountered significant difficulties in monitoring the activities of election commissions, especially in the periods between the days of voting. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that there are estimates of significant electoral fraud during both votes. In the 2021 election, the number of bogus votes may have been as high as 17 million (Safonova 2022). Despite the official end of the pandemic as designated by the WHO, multi-day voting remained an option to be used at the discretion of the relevant electoral commission. In the 2022 regional elections, some regions opted for it while others did not.

Just like online voting, early voting schemes underscore the tension between accommodating the interests of internal migrants and safeguarding election integrity. Unfortunately, there is little

in the way of movement beyond formalism. Residence registration remains the key element in determining who gets to vote and where. The introduction of online absentee slips improved the situation of internal migrants in federal elections, but no such option exists in regional elections. Such a situation is problematic because residency registration in its current form has fallen behind the dynamic of internal economic migration. This tendency is especially pronounced in economically developed regions, such as the city of Moscow, which are aware of the limitations of the residency registration system. This can be illustrated by the fact that when imposing a lockdown in the early days of the pandemic, city officials made it clear that they would not be relying on residency registration. The debate over the electoral rights of internal migrants may be moot today, but one can expect it to reignite if Russia moves towards more democratic politics. Considering the increased role of regions during both the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, it is conceivable that democratic reforms would empower regional authorities even further.[7]

Overall, the accommodation of migrants in the Russian electoral law is somewhat paradoxical. Unlike in the case of many other states, great effort is made to enable Russian citizens abroad to vote. There are no legal obstacles to expatriates exercising their right to vote in federal elections, and sometimes authorities make extra efforts to accommodate their situation. In contrast, the situation of immigrants and internal migrants within Russia is much less favourable. Immigrants, bar a few exceptional cases, are disenfranchised until they receive Russian citizenship. The disproportional treatment of migrants in electoral law may stem from the different attitudes towards different types of migration. Russian speakers outside Russia were a steady source of immigration to the country throughout the 1990s, helping to offset the negative demographic trends of the decade. Buoyed by this tendency, legislators and the Foreign Ministry were keen to keep expatriate Russians within the orbit of the state by projecting ‘soft power’. In the 2000s and 2010s, the attitude remained the same, although more menacing overtones of the ‘Russian world’ projected by force

began to appear. It remains to be seen if electoral laws that favour expatriate Russians will survive the war in Ukraine. If disparaging and aggressive statements by Russian officials towards recent emigrants translate into policy, voting abroad might become more difficult. This would also take into account recent opposition successes among expatriate Russians.

Once migrants (even the same Russian speakers from abroad) are in Russia, however, the attitude towards them changes. Rather than a resource, they are seen as a burden and a security risk. Accordingly, they are dealt with by police and regional authorities. Similarly to other ethnically and economically diverse countries, the negative attitudes extend to internal migrants who are Russian citizens. In the context of the rapid dissolution of the Soviet Union, the boundaries between external and internal migration were blurred. Regional administrations thus instituted restrictive rules that were akin to immigration regimes. In an attempt to streamline the process, a federal law on the freedom of movement was adopted. It instituted a residency registration system which became the basis for assigning citizens to electoral precincts. Despite significant liberalization, the system is not attuned to the scale of internal economic migration and the state of the housing market. Russian electoral legislation contains several mechanisms which could help to accommodate the situation of internal migrants lacking residency registration in the place where they live. Yet these mechanisms fail to enfranchise such people in regional elections. Furthermore, they have consequences that are problematic from the standpoint of electoral integrity. Logically, the link between residency registration and electoral franchise needs to be reassessed. However, currently, the electoral rights of internal migrants are viewed mostly through a formalist lens. This approach extends to electoral integrity advocates, who are focused on the potential for abuse. An unfortunate consequence of this focus is the othering of some social groups, which further exacerbates the situation of internal migrants.

Migration and the 'Passive' Element of Electoral Rights

The Russian legislation puts relatively few impediments in the way of the active element of the expatriate right to vote. The same cannot be said of the passive element. This was restricted early on in the case of the federal presidency. Only the first Russian presidential election, held in 1991, saw no restrictions on expatriate candidates.[8] However, one has to keep in mind that at the time Russia was still formally a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, blurring the distinction between expatriates and 'home citizens'. Yet in 1993, the new Russian Constitution specified that a presidential candidate had to have resided in the Russian Federation for ten consecutive years (Constitution of the Russian Federation, Version of 12 December 1993, Article 81, Part 2). This wording was introduced already in the first draft proposed to the Constitutional Assembly convened by President Yeltsin in April 1993 (Filatov et al. 1995, 23). In contrast, the rival draft (Rumyantsev 1993) prepared by the constitutional commission of the parliament (Supreme Council) contained no residency requirement for presidential candidates but merely excluded those with foreign citizenship. The draft developed by the Constitutional Assembly was ultimately adopted following the self-coup by President Yeltsin. The residency requirement for presidential candidates saw little debate, although some wanted it to be more restrictive. The Lipetsk regional legislature proposed extending the residency requirement from 10 to 15 years and explicitly excluding dual citizens (Filatov et al. 1995, 235). Somewhat tellingly, the same proposal saw presidential candidates being vetted by a 'state independent medical commission' (Filatov et al. 1995, 236). Thus, in a true Foucauldian manner, the 'other' was a confluence of 'sick' and 'foreign'. However, in the turbulent 1990s such forms of othering were not yet high on the political agenda.

The constitutional residency requirement was tested in the 1996 presidential election. The relevant federal law contained no additional requirements for presidential candidates beyond those

set out in the Constitution. Furthermore, the law stated that a Russian citizen outside Russia has 'the full spectrum of electoral rights' (see Federal Law of 17 May 1995, No. 76-FZ, Article 1). One of the candidates, army general Aleksandr Lebed, was formally non-compliant with the provision. He resided outside Russia when commanding troops in Transnistria, including during the brief conflict between the territory and central authorities of Moldova in 1992. However, this fact seemed to cause no debate and the Central Electoral Commission duly registered Lebed as a presidential candidate (Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation 1996, Ruling No. 89/728-II). Such an interpretation avoided excessive formalism by accepting military service abroad as an exception to the general residency requirement. A rather intriguing legal question was averted when the Central Election Commission deemed that prospective presidential candidate Artyom Tarasov had failed to collect enough voter signatures.[9] A self-proclaimed 'first Soviet millionaire', Tarasov lived in London exile between 1991 and 1994, thus falling short of the residency requirement.[10]

Inspired by the federal residency requirement, constituent entities of the Russian Federation moved to introduce their own. The federal law adopted in 1994 (Federal Law of 6 December 1994, No. 56-FZ, Article 4) stipulated that regional residency requirements should not extend beyond one year. However, some of the 21 constituent republics introduced far more stringent restrictions for candidates vying for executive leadership. For instance, in Khakassia the residency requirement was seven years, while Sakha (Yakutia) set the bar at 15 years (Zhukov 1997). Another federal law, adopted in 1997, attempted to preclude such developments. It stipulated that the right to be elected could be limited by residency requirements only on the basis of the federal Constitution (Federal Law of 19 September 1997, No. 124-FZ, Article 4, Part 5). Simultaneously, the Constitutional Court struck down a residency requirement for legislators and the chief executive of the Khakassia Republic (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1997, Judgment No. 9-P). The judges subsequently further

clarified that any qualifications for regional elected offices could be established only by federal legislation (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1998, Judgment No. 12-P). Consequently, outsiders were able to be elected to executive positions in the constituent republics. For instance, in 2002 a gold mining millionaire won a presidential election in Adygea by a landslide, despite have previously resided in Siberia for several decades.

Several constituent republics instituted further roadblocks for outsiders by requiring them to sit an exam in an official regional language. This practice was brought to the purview of the federal Constitutional Court in 1998. The Court effectively avoided the issue by pointing out that in the instant case, the legal status of the regional language was not established; two judges of the Court issued dissenting opinions, with one arguing that the language requirement was unconstitutional and the other the opposite (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 1998, Judgment No. 12-P). However, three years later the Court claimed that its 1998 judgment had found the language requirement to be unconstitutional (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, 2001, Decision No. 260-O). In the jurisprudence of the ECtHR, the language requirement for parliamentary candidates was found to be in line with the European Convention (*Podkolzina v. Latvia* 2002, 34) provided that procedural fairness had been achieved (*Podkolzina v. Latvia* 2002, 36). Interestingly, a language requirement was resurrected in the 2007 treaty between the federal authorities and the Republic of Tatarstan. At this point, direct elections of regional chief executives were abolished. Thus, the language requirement concerned only candidates nominated by the federal president to the regional legislature.

Therefore, the migration-related restrictions on the passive element of voting rights remained relatively light during the 1990s and early 2000s. The few active restrictions concerned the federal presidency and regional chief executives, whose positions were modelled after the former.[11] In practice, the exclusion of current and former expatriates from contesting presidential elections had little practical effect. In contrast to the situation in many Central

and Eastern European countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Serbia, to name a few), no members of the Russian diaspora were able to launch a successful political career. This was the case even though there were no residency requirements to be elected, for instance, to the parliament. Unlike at the federal level, residency requirements were a pertinent topic in the constituent republics of the Russian Federation. The bid to close executive positions to 'outsiders' was met with stiff resistance from both the federal legislature and the judiciary. Ultimately this forced republics to drop residency requirements. Language proficiency requirements, which could also be seen as a tool against outsiders in electoral politics, had a longer lifespan. Although they were discarded by the Constitutional Court in 2001, the requirements reappeared in Tatarstan when the regional presidency ceased to be a directly elected position.[12]

As noted in the first part of the chapter, the 1990s and early 2000s in Russia saw the unprecedented opening of emigration channels. While for many this was a permanent solution, some used the opening of channels as an opportunity to enhance their status. Prominent businesspeople and some politicians obtained foreign citizenship or residency. For many years these steps were viewed with little suspicion. The Russian Constitution and nationality law do not recognize multiple citizenship unless a special treaty is adopted with a foreign state. Only two such treaties were ever concluded—with Turkmenistan in 1993 (cancelled in 2015) (Consular Department 2022) and with Tajikistan in 1995 (Federal Law of 15 December 1996, No. 152-FZ). Outside the bounds of these treaties, the Russian federal legislation would treat Russian citizens equally regardless of other citizenships.

The situation began to change in the mid-2000s. The Russian political leadership became increasingly disillusioned with cooperation with the West, particularly in the wake of the crisis surrounding the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. Against this background, authorities began to move against foreign influence in internal politics. The ideological basis for these moves was provided by the concept of 'sovereign democracy', expounded by

chief Kremlin spin doctor Vladislav Surkov and pro-government analysts (Lipman 2006). One of the moves was a 2006 law (Federal Law of 25 July 2006, No. 128-FZ) which amended electoral legislation to bar people affiliated with foreign states from standing in elections and serving on electoral commissions. The bar extended to dual nationals, holders of foreign residence permits, and those otherwise entitled to permanently reside in another state. Exceptions from the bar could extend to local elections only on the basis of an international treaty (Federal Law of 25 July 2006, No. 128-FZ, Article 6).

Already in 2007, the law was challenged in the Constitutional Court. The Court decided to resolve the issue without public hearings, issuing a decision on constitutionality. The judges held that although the federal Constitution did not envisage restrictions on Russians holding other nationalities, it did not preclude federal laws from instituting such restrictions (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, 2007, Decision No. 797-O-O). The Court also alleged the double loyalty of people holding multiple nationalities. In its opinion, 'formal-legal or factual subordination of a legislator … to the sovereign will not only of the Russian Federation but also of a foreign people do not correspond with constitutional principles of legislator's independence, state sovereignty and puts in question the supremacy of the Constitution of the Russian Federation' (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, 2007, Decision No. 797-O-O). In effect, the Constitutional Court gave a legal basis to the sovereigntist ideology expounded by the Kremlin. Within this framework, Russians with multiple nationalities are viewed as suspicious and need to be excluded from the political life of the country.

The Constitutional Court somewhat corrected itself in 2010 when it heard a case about a bar on election commission membership for Russians with foreign residence permits. The Court noted that there were no specific qualifications for election commission members. It further distinguished residence permits from citizenship, as the former did not establish a permanent and overarching legal-political connection. Thus, there were no reasons to

believe that such citizens threatened state sovereignty. The Court further recalled the freedom of emigration from Russia and obligation of state support for expatriates characteristic of the 1990s approaches (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 2010, Judgement No. 14-P; see Part 1). Such an approach aligned with the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs voiced during the hearings (Pushkarskaya 2010). However, this judgment has not been implemented for over ten years. This fact seems to suggest that it was an outlier.

The debate over the ability of dual nationals to run in Russian elections happened just as the ECtHR found similar legislation in Moldova to violate the European Convention. In the *Tanase* case, the European judges, unlike their Russian counterparts, were not convinced of abstract allegations of dual loyalty. Instead, they looked for factual proof of them and found none (*Tănase v. Moldova* 2010, 168–169). Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian opposition politician with dual nationality, saw his registration as a candidate in a regional election as proof of Russian authorities intending to comply with the *Tănase* judgment (*Kara-Murza v. Russia* 2022, 10). However, the regional prosecutor had a different opinion, successfully challenging Kara-Murza's registration in court (*Kara-Murza v. Russia* 2022, 11–16). This denial of registration ultimately became the subject of proceedings in the ECtHR. The Strasbourg Court flatly rejected the sovereigntist rationale, pointing to the lack of a real external threat to Russian institutions (*Kara-Murza v. Russia* 2022, 47). The Court confirmed the existence of a European consensus over the electoral rights of dual nationals, established in *Tanase*, and argued that individualized measures would have been sufficient to protect legitimate state interests (e.g. through denial of security clearance) (*Kara-Murza v. Russia* 2022, 49). The blanket ban on dual nationals being elected did not provide such individualization (*Kara-Murza v. Russia* 2022, 50). Mikhail Lobov, the ECtHR judge in respect of Russia, put forward a dissenting opinion which attempted to couch the sovereigntist approach of the domestic legislator and the Constitutional Court in the language of citizenship (*Kara-Murza v. Russia*

2022, dissenting opinion of Judge Lobov, 7–8). In his opinion, dual nationals had effectively chosen to be considered second-class citizens when it comes to the passive element of electoral rights. This position is not necessarily without merit, as in other contexts the Strasbourg Court went to great lengths to emphasize the element of personal choice in deciding on one's citizenship status (*Savickis and Others v. Latvia* 2022, 215). With Russia's exit from the Convention system, however, the point is moot.

The electoral ban for dual nationals introduced in 2006 had one significant flaw. Citizens were not required to disclose their other nationality or a residence permit. Nor was such information routinely shared by states granting the relevant status. Thus, such information would only be revealed voluntarily or obtained by authorities through investigative techniques. The applicant in the Constitutional Court case concerning the ban remarked that it represented 'a trap for an honest man'. The situation changed in 2014. An amendment to the citizenship law (Federal Law of 4 June 2014, No. 142-FZ, Article 1) required Russians henceforth to self-report upon obtaining another nationality or a foreign residence permit. The amendment did not apply to those naturalizing as Russian citizens or permanently residing abroad. Failure to comply with the obligation to self-report could entail criminal liability and a hefty fine (Federal Law of 4 June 2014, No. 142-FZ, Article 2). The practice of actual criminal persecution turned out to be quite spotty. For instance, in 2023 only seven individuals were charged with failure to self-report foreign citizenship or residence permit (Keffer 2024). Thus, criminal prosecution was not something replicated on a mass scale. However, it did not need to be, if the goal was to deter individuals from attempting to shirk the prohibitions for dual citizens. The fear of criminal prosecution could cause a chilling effect on potential candidates for elected office and/or civil servants.

The practices of enforcing electoral legislation since 2006 have displayed an increasing tendency to rely on the prohibitions in federal law, even when the constitutional restrictions would suffice. In 2007, the Supreme Court of Russia (Supreme Court of the

Russian Federation 2007, Decision No. GKPI07–1720) upheld the decision of the Central Electoral Commission (2007, Ruling No. 80/644–5) that barred former Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovskiy from collecting signatures to run for president. The Supreme Court based its decision both on the constitutional requirement obliging presidential hopefuls to reside in Russia for ten consecutive years and the federal law barring citizens with foreign residence permits (Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation 2007, Ruling No. 80/644–5). Bukovskiy's lawyers challenged these arguments. In their opinion, a ten-year residence requirement could be fulfilled at any time during the candidate's lifetime, especially considering the registration of Alexander Lebed in the 1996 election (see above; Anticompromat n.d.). As for the possession of the foreign residence permit, it could not be reliably verified by the Russian authorities (as this happened before the introduction of the self-reporting requirement) (Supreme Court of Russian Federation 2008, Ruling of the Cassation Panel No. KAS08–5). The cassation panel of the Supreme Court dismissed these arguments. In particular, it found no reasons for an expansive interpretation of the ten-year residence requirement.

Given the fact that the ten-year residence requirement had a constitutional character, the Supreme Court could have used the Bukovskiy case as an opportunity to refer the question to the Constitutional Court.[13] The resolution of that question would have likely involved clarifying possible exceptions from the residence requirement, including military and diplomatic service abroad. A more intricate issue would be if asylum abroad qualified as an exception. The ECtHR in *Melnychenko* interpreted internal law expansively to find that denying an asylee an opportunity to stand for legislative election violated their Convention rights. It is doubtful, however, that an interpretation could be so expansive as to cover Bukovskiy. Although he was expelled from the Soviet Union against his will, he decided to remain in the United Kingdom upon the restoration of his Russian citizenship.

The 2018 presidential campaign showed the potential of the self-reporting law to achieve the intended chilling effect. One of

the prospective candidates initially had his campaign committee registered, but the Central Election Commission later sought the annulment of its decision. The Commission learned that in 2014 the future candidate self-reported that he had had a Finnish residence permit. On this basis, the Commission decided that the candidate ran afoul both of the constitutional residency requirement and of the ban on foreign residents. The Supreme Court dismissed the first argument but agreed with the second (Supreme Court of the Russian Federation 2018, Decision No. AKPI 18–1). The candidate appealed, claiming that he had had the residence permit voided before the beginning of the campaign. The appellate panel of the Supreme Court, however, was not convinced by the supporting documents and let the decision to exclude the candidate stand (Supreme Court of the Russian Federation 2018, Appellate Ruling of the Appellate Panel No. APL 18–12). The proceedings highlighted the potential of self-reporting requirements to stymie potential candidates with foreign affiliations. Yet they also underscored the formalist approach of the Supreme Court. Just like ten years previously, instead of trying to contextualize the residency requirement, judges opted for the narrow reading of the law.

The 2020 constitutional amendments further solidified the exclusionary tendencies towards citizens with foreign connections. The amendments extended the residency requirements for presidential candidates from 10 to 25 years. They further excluded anyone who had ever held foreign citizenship or residence permits. In a sign of times, this exclusion did not apply to former citizens of a country which joined the Russian Federation or a part of which did so. At the time of its adoption, the provision applied to the annexed Crimea. The amendments also gave constitutional character to the 2006 ban on elected positions for Russians with foreign citizenship or residence permits.[14]

The exclusion of dual nationals from positions of political power is not wholly unprecedented. A significant number of the Council of Europe states, including several post-Soviet countries, either prohibit their citizens from holding other nationality or bar

dual citizens from the offices of power (*Tănase v. Moldova* 2010, 87–93). Some countries go further by forbidding e.g. 'allegiance to a foreign power' (Thwaites and Irving 2020). Yet the restrictions on citizens with foreign residence permits appear unprecedented. Mere residence abroad is not sufficient to establish a close connection with a foreign state. The Constitutional Court shared this opinion in its judgment. However, the general tendency of othering anybody with a foreign connection prevented the judgment from being implemented.

The shift towards othering would have been out of place in the 1990s, when Russia was actively opening to the world. Even then, however, former emigrants did not enter the country's political life. Therefore, the introduction of a residency requirement for presidential candidates caused little debate. In contrast, when similar requirements were introduced by constituent republics of the Russian Federation, they caused significant backlash from legislators and the Constitutional Court. Ultimately these regional requirements were rescinded. The pronounced authoritarian trend in Russia in the 2000s produced the notion of 'sovereign democracy'. One of the practical effects of this concept was the ban on dual nationals and holders of foreign residence permit running for elected office. The ban was strengthened in 2014 by a general self-reporting requirement for Russians holding foreign citizenship or residence permits. The 2020 constitutional amendments turned the ban into a lifetime exclusion from presidential campaigns for anyone who had ever held foreign citizenship or lived abroad with a residence permit. The amendments also entrenched the other aspects of the ban at the constitutional level.

Conclusion

Throughout the past century, mass migration has been a consequence of tumultuous Russian history. It has often been an extension of ethnic, religious, social, and political division. Post-Soviet Russia has been no exception, although that period brought certain specifics. The establishment of newly independent states

blurred the lines between internal and external migration. This led to somewhat paradoxical results. The citizenship policy was open towards compatriots abroad who were seen as a potential demographic pool and a means of projecting soft power. Internal migrants, on the other hand, were often viewed with suspicion, as a drain on resources and a security risk. Election laws reflected general state policy. They accommodated expatriate citizens, enfranchising them in federal elections and facilitating the vote. Inside Russia, however, the right to vote was tied to residency registration. This system, a successor to the repressive Soviet one, was abused by regional authorities and failed to reflect the economic realities. In practice it was unnecessarily cumbersome for individuals, leading to their disenfranchisement. By the end of the 2010s, the situation of internal migrants was remedied through the extension of early voting, easier access to absentee slips, and online voting. However, these remedies often facilitated election malpractice.

Unlike many other Central and Eastern European countries, Russia has lacked a politically active diaspora. This situation was solidified with the introduction of a ten-year residency requirement for prospective presidential candidates in the 1993 Constitution. The requirement was enforced unevenly. Military officers serving abroad were not subject to it, while former dissidents had it applied to them. The pronounced authoritarian trends during the presidency of Vladimir Putin from the mid-2000s have had a distinct focus on state sovereignty. This resulted in the adoption of the law which barred Russians holding other citizenships and residence permits from running for elected office. Such restrictions are not unprecedented, as many democracies limit dual nationals from holding elected office. However, the Russian restrictions are notable for their breadth. They were also significant as an early indicator of isolationist trends in the country. Subsequently, the restrictions were strengthened further. In 2014 they were beefed up by a general obligation to self-report foreign citizenships and residence permits. In 2020 the restrictions were given constitutional status, while former foreign citizens and holders of foreign

residence permits became forever excluded from standing for presidency.

Electoral rules concerning migration reflect attitudes towards the different categories of individuals affected by migration. The rules are used to reward some categories and to discriminate against others. The general policy reflected by these rules is directed at the twin goals of expanding the population and insulating the political elites. These goals are especially visible in the light of the invasion of Ukraine, where electoral procedures (referenda) may become a tool for territorial annexation while emigration and foreign connections are becoming even more suspicious.

If Russia ever restored democratic governance, its society would have to reconsider the relationship between migration and electoral rights. New electoral rules are likely to be discussed to balance the interests of election integrity with the effective exercise of electoral rights.

Notes

1 The relevant provision of the Criminal Code was struck down as unconstitutional only in December 1995. See Judgment 17-P (Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, 1995).
2 That practice, in turn, to a large extent copied earlier imperial approaches to regulating internal migration.
3 Residing without a registration, however, constituted an administrative (minor) offence.
4 A popular quality newspaper, *Kommersant*, at the time described the situation as a tug-of-war between the liberal approach of the Constitutional Court and hardline regional policies. See Zhukov and Shilov (1998).
5 See also *Kotlyar v. Russia*, 2022, 5–10.
6 According to Ella Pamfilova, the Chair of the Central Electoral Commission (Izvestia 2018).
7 This would actually signify a return to the system envisaged in the 1992 Federal Treaty and the 1993 Constitution but undermined by Putin's centralizing drive.
8 This section deals mostly with restrictions concerning external migration. Restrictions for internal migrants are relatively rare and are dealt with when the need arises.

9 In the 1996 Russian presidential election, candidates were required to submit one million signatures. See Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation (1997, Decision No. 31-O).
10 The European Court of Human Rights in *Melnychenko v. Ukraine* (2004) proposed a creative solution for political exiles denied passive voting rights due to a residency requirement. It deemed that formal administrative registration was sufficient regardless of actual presence in the country. Arguably such an approach could have been applied in Tarasov's circumstances.
11 This tendency was reflected in the jurisprudence of the federal Constitutional Court. See Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation (1996, Judgment No. 2-P).
12 Thus, in line with the position of the Constitutional Court, electoral rights were no longer violated. See Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation (2005, Judgment No. 13-P).
13 The federal Constitution entrusts the Constitutional Court with 'interpreting' it. See Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 125.
14 Except regional legislative assemblies and bodies of local self-government, where the ban remains rooted in the federal law.

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CHAPTER 6

Kyrgyz Diaspora Online

Understanding Transnational Political Participation

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Abstract

In recent years, social media platforms have become sites of populist propaganda, fake news, bots, and trolls that have influenced public perceptions and the political behaviours of individuals worldwide. At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for migrants, connecting them to each other and to their homelands. This chapter investigates how Kyrgyz emigrants engage with virtual communities politically: does cross-border online political participation challenge illiberal institutions or add to their resiliency? The study reveals that while overall political discourse shows signs of susceptibility to populist rhetoric and a preference for strongman leaders, at the same time, the virtual space serves as an arena for emigrants in the diaspora community to exercise political membership and participate in crisis-induced nation-building experience in the homeland.

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Introduction

In recent years social media platforms have become sites of populist propaganda, fake news, bots, and trolls that have influenced public perceptions and the political behaviours of individuals worldwide. At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for migrants which connects them to each other and to their homelands. This chapter investigates how Kyrgyz emigrants engage with virtual communities politically: does cross-border online political participation challenge illiberal institutions or add to their resiliency? Content analysis of Kyrgyz emigrants' posts and comments in public social media groups and pages on VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook demonstrates that based on how information is shared, political content can be categorized into vertical and horizontal messages. The former includes content published by site administrators representing formal diaspora associations or political leaders, parties, and candidates for office; the latter emerges spontaneously among the members of the group and often leads not only to lively online discussions but also to real-life political organizing. Case studies of online-to-offline spillover effects that resulted in social and electoral mobilization during the October Revolution in 2020, as well as street-level activism during the COVID-19 pandemic and Kyrgyz–Tajik conflicts, show that online conversations are a legitimate form of political participation with important and tangible implications. Analysis of these cases also reveals that while overall political discourse shows signs of susceptibility to populist rhetoric and a preference for strongman leaders, at the same time the virtual space serves as an arena for emigrants in the diaspora community to exercise political membership and participate in crisis-induced nation-building experience in the homeland.

Understanding the Nexus between Illiberalism, Social Media, and Emigrants' Political Participation

The Rise of Illiberalism in Kyrgyzstan

One of the most significant characteristics of the decade since the mid-2010s has been the spread and strengthening of illiberal regimes around the globe: from democratic backsliding in both well-established and new democracies, such as the United States, India, Poland, and Türkiye, to the strengthening of persistent forms of authoritarianism with a democratic façade, as in Kyrgyzstan. Freedom House has reported that 2021 was the 16th consecutive year of worldwide democratic decline. In line with this general finding, Kyrgyzstan's score fell from 39/100 in 2020 to 27/100 in 2022, bringing it down from 'partly free' to 'not free' and placing it into the 'consolidated authoritarian' category (Freedom House 2022).

After gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan was often dubbed an 'island of democracy' for its early liberal reforms in the 1990s, the revolutions that ousted authoritarian leaders in 2005 and 2010, and the transition to the parliamentary form of governance via referendum in June 2010. Political changes and upheavals made the country stand out among its neighbours with their long-term personalistic dictatorships. However, despite democratization efforts, the country has still struggled with widespread corruption (Transparency International 2023), weakly institutionalized parties with 'privatized' party lists (Doolotkeldieva and Wolters 2017), and civil society restrictions (Human Rights Watch 2022). The most recent revolution in October 2020 brought to power a populist leader, Sadyr Zhaparov, who rapidly put forward constitutional changes that rolled back earlier democratic reforms, significantly reduced the power of the parliament, and centralized power in the hands of the presidency (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Meanwhile, the repression of political opponents, civil society activists, and journalists has become commonplace. For instance, in October 2022, 26 political activists were detained on dubious charges of 'plotting a coup' for their opposition to the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border deal surrounding the Kempir-Abad Reservoir (Dzhumasheva 2022). At the same time, journalists face increasing censorship and harassment in the form of surveillance, arrests, deportations, and attempts to shut down independent media outlets (Erkebayeva 2022). The crackdown on opposing voices and the tight grip that the state has over the media represent the main pillars of an illiberal political system (Rollberg and Laruelle 2015). However, while traditional forms of media such as television, radio, and newspapers are relatively easy for the state to control, digital and social media are much harder to manage. Therefore, unsurprisingly, social media has become one of the central arenas of political struggle.

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Narratives

Years before ascending to the presidency, while still in prison, Sadyr Zhaparov used platforms such as WhatsApp to rally followers and communicate with them; this was a crucial instrument of mobilization, especially among emigrant populations in Russia (Solovyev 2021). Now, as president, he continues to use various social media such as Facebook and Instagram to spread illiberal ideologies and effectively deliver his populist messages and promote them through bots and trolls. Notably, Zhaparov is not the first politician to utilize 'troll factories'; in fact, journalist investigations revealed that identical fake social media accounts had been used to spread propaganda messages for the ousted President Sooronbai Zheenbekov too (Shabalin 2020). Therefore, Zhaparov did not create this phenomenon but amplified its magnitude. His discourse on social media reflects the key elements of typical populist rhetoric: the Manichean 'good' versus 'evil' and 'us' versus 'them' outlook. For instance, on 4 January 2021, just a few days

before the elections and the referendum, Zhaparov posted the following on his Instagram page:

> [They] proved that for thirty years they stole [from the people] and forgot about their responsibilities to the people. The proof is the organization of the so-called anti-referendum protests … Everyone needs to understand that the referendum is being carried out for the benefit of the people; it must determine the precise form of government in our country: parliamentary or presidential. The priority should be the interests of our people. It should always be so. From now on, we must learn how to follow the people, and those who refuse to do this, we will teach them. These people have got used to freely taking advantage of the wealth of the people for their own personal benefit and have changed the constitution in their own interests. And now they see that they are about to lose their meal ticket, they have started desperately fighting and organizing pointless and inefficient protests … I would like to say: don't try, the people have woken up and understood your hidden agendas. (Zhaparov 2021; my translation)

This post was written in response to street protests against constitutional changes organized by opposition political parties, as well as prominent journalists, activists, and youth organizations. In his construction of 'enemies', Zhaparov in essence splits the population into in-groups that include the 'people' who support him and out-groups that include everyone who opposes his policies. The broad category of enemies encompasses 'corrupt elites', which includes establishment politicians, parties, and businesspeople, as well as democratic civic activists and non-governmental organizations. Although in this post Zhaparov refers to mystical 'they' multiple times, he never specifies who exactly 'they' are. Nevertheless, the reader can intuitively understand that 'they', i.e. all of those protesters in the streets in early January 2021, are not part of the 'people'. This typically populist construction of the Manichean worldview of a cosmic war between good and evil necessitates a commitment to the majoritarian (not pluralist) democratic system and, at the same time, justifies the use of non-democratic means

to 'punish the enemies' and achieve the realization of the people's will. Zhaparov successfully uses all of the techniques in the populist toolkit in order to centralize and consolidate political power; he exploits existing social cleavages and amplifies the grievances of impoverished people who over the years have become disillusion with the promise of liberal democracy.

Yet Zhaparov's opponents, independent media organizations, and civil society activists also use these same social media platforms to expose corruption, violence, and socio-political problems that call into question the policies of the current government (Putz 2019). For instance, Bashtan Bashta, a youth civil movement with a strong presence on social media, particularly YouTube and Instagram, began to publish content in 2020 in response to corruption scandals and democratic backsliding. Since then the organization has developed and published video content that raises awareness on various social and political issues, such as gender violence, electoral fraud, suppression of media freedom, and the war in Ukraine. Young narrators of informational and educational content spread their messages in multiple languages using presentation formats and techniques that make their content appealing and easily accessible, especially to the younger audience. Therefore, social media embodies a site of dynamic tensions between competing narratives of illiberal forces that are often (but not always) associated with the state,[1] such as illiberal parties and politicians, and their supporters, versus resistance forces confronting the state, such as (often West-backed) independent media, political activists, and civil society organizations.

Emigrant Participation in Homeland Politics

At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for Kyrgyz emigrants, which connects them to each other and to their homelands. Emigrants, who constitute a significant part of Kyrgyzstan's citizenry, play a key role in the politics of their homeland in a variety of different ways: through remittances (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011), voting (Laruelle

and Doolotkeldieva 2013), organized political networks (Filatova 2019), and political participation via social media. The sheer numbers of emigrants signal their enormous collective impact on the Kyrgyz economy and society. According to the Ministry of Labour, which oversees inflows and outflows of labour migration, 1,118,000 Kyrgyz citizens live and work abroad, the absolute majority of them (over 1 million) in Russia and tens of thousands in Kazakhstan, Türkiye, United States, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Canada, and South Korea (Podolskaya, 2022). The variety of destinations that they choose shows that the Kyrgyz diaspora is not a monolithic political or social bloc but rather a plurality of migrant communities in various parts of the world (Ragazzi 2009).

Unsurprisingly, the political preferences of migrants also vary significantly based on their levels of education, their socioeconomic status, and the location of the host country. For instance, analysis of their voting behaviour in the 2021 presidential elections shows that the majority of Kyrgyz emigrants in Russia supported illiberal and populist Sadyr Zhaparov (77.2 per cent) and demonstrated very little support for Klara Sooronkulova (0.23 per cent), an opposition candidate who had recently been detained on the charges of 'plotting a coup'. However, emigrants in the West, i.e. the United States, Canada, and Europe, voted for Sooronkulova in much larger numbers (21.9 per cent) and showed much less support for Zhaparov compared with voters in Russia (29.4 per cent).[2] This disparity can be explained by many factors, including the local political environment of the host states and the socioeconomic characteristics of the diaspora members. High entry barriers to Western countries mean that those who emigrate there are more likely to have higher levels of education and financial security, whereas Russia is more accessible to labour migrants with lower socioeconomic status.

The disparity can also be explained by supply-side factors, meaning the efforts of political entrepreneurs to mobilize diaspora votes. For instance, the political party Zamandash was established in 2007 out of the Kyrgyz diaspora organization of the same name

in Russia and Kazakhstan. This party was particularly successful in mobilizing voters in Russia during the 2010 parliamentary election; in some Russian cities, Zamandash was able to secure more than half of the votes. Yet within Kyrgyzstan, only 3 per cent voted for this party (Open Data Kyrgyzstan 2010). Politicians such as Adakhan Madumarov and his party Butun Kyrgyzstan also turned to emigrants in Russia for electoral support and lobbied for the expansion of voting rights and the establishment of additional polling stations abroad (Azattyk 2019). Similarly, Sadyr Zhaparov and his party Mekenchil have also cultivated grassroots connections with the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia, and social media has played a critical role in this process.

Nevertheless, when studying Kyrgyz emigrant engagement with social media, at first glance it seems that it is mostly apolitical (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2019). Conversations in public groups and forums tend to centre around everyday problems, such as employment, housing, social services, or legal help with immigration documents. Moreover, social media serves as the primary channel of communication with families and friends back in the hometown or the home village, as well as a way to connect with other emigrants from the same locality and create a 'smartphone-based translocal community' within the host society (Urinboyev 2021, 89).

When the conversations among diaspora members turn political, some may argue that they reflect not genuine political participation but rather the phenomenon of 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism', suggesting that simply liking, commenting on, and sharing social media posts does not have any tangible impact and therefore is not a legitimate form of engagement with politics (Morozov 2009; Gladwell 2011; Kristofferson, White and Peloza 2013). Yet others see online activism as a form of political participation that can help marginalized people to overcome barriers that impede their use of political voice and establish social ties that they cannot easily build in the real world, and this naturally includes migrants who reside thousands of miles away from their homeland and are dispersed across vast geographies (McKenna and Bargh 1998).

Extant studies of diaspora political participation in Eurasia and beyond find that diasporic communities utilize the internet as a transnational public sphere in which to engage in discourse on the history, culture, politics, and identity of a nation striving for self-determination and democracy (NurMuhammad et al. 2016) or resistance against dominant narratives of the homeland in the host state (Chan 2005). For many immigrant groups, the internet serves as a crucial medium for political participation, fostering a sense of citizenship and belonging (Chari 2014). The advent of the internet, social media, and digital technologies has amplified the number of informal channels for socio-political activism across borders, enabling geographically dispersed compatriots to overcome barriers to forming social networks and organizing for political action (Mercea 2018). This chapter adopts the latter point of view and investigates how migrants engage with virtual communities politically and whether cross-border online-offline political participation challenges illiberal institutions or adds to their resiliency. This chapter's contribution is that it demonstrates how virtual space is a venue of persistent contention between liberal and illiberal ideas, which both state and non-state actors utilize to mobilize for action, especially in times of social crisis.

Research Methodology

This chapter is based on inductive research studying political engagement among Kyrgyz emigrants in different host regions, including Russia, the US, the EU, and countries in the Middle East. In this work, I employ a holistic look at aggregate textual data with the goal of understanding general patterns of Kyrgyz emigrant political participation on social media. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving software-assisted content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of virtual communities and groups formed by Kyrgyz emigrants on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte. The timeframe of the analysis is between May 2020 and May 2022.

Case Selection

The analysis of texts was carried out on three social media platforms, namely Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte. Facebook, one of the oldest venues for virtual communication yet still popular, is more frequently used by English-speaking Kyrgyz emigrants, whereas Odnoklassniki and VKontake, platforms developed in Russia with appearance, format, and features very similar to Facebook, are more commonly used by emigrants residing in Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union. These three social media platforms were selected for three main reasons: (1) their widespread use by Kyrgyz emigrants, (2) the abundance of pages and groups with large membership and active discussion boards, and (3) the low barriers to entry, i.e. access to groups does not require much social capital, unlike private messenger chat sites such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram that are based on invitations.

Sampling Strategy

A sample of 37 social media groups and pages was selected for the analysis. The initial phase of sampling involved identifying relevant groups on Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki through keyword searches including terms such as 'Kyrgyz', 'Kyrgyzstan', 'кыргыз', 'кыргыздар', 'кыргызы', 'кыргызстацы', and 'кыргызская диаспора'. The search was restricted based on three criteria: (1) focusing on 'groups' and 'pages' on Facebook, 'groups' on Odnoklassniki, and 'communities' on VKontakte as the types of resources; (2) selecting groups with a membership or subscriber count of at least 1,000, ensuring a substantial audience; and (3) including only public groups where content is freely accessible. This selection process did not exclusively target explicitly expatriate groups but encompassed any group containing the nation or country name in Cyrillic or Latin languages. During this process, challenges arose when encountering VKontakte and Odnoklassniki groups with high membership rates, often

managed by individuals concealing their identity. Upon reviewing the content in these groups, it became apparent that they served solely as platforms for advertising goods and services, lacking any meaningful inter-member discussions. Consequently, these groups were excluded from the research sample. However, 'pages' on Facebook operated by diaspora organizations were included in the sample, even if some had slightly fewer than 1,000 members. The subsequent step involved aggregating all textual data from group discussions on each website, then categorizing it by social media platform and organizing it into separate folders. To analyse the content, NVivo software was used to calculate word frequency distribution and conduct key term searches. Following the content analysis, a meticulous manual review of posts, images, links, and comments in each group was performed to identify discursive patterns, which were subsequently categorized with specific date stamps.

Publicly accessible open groups were specifically chosen to ensure inclusivity, as they have low barriers for emigrant participation, capturing individuals with varying levels of social capital, social media use opportunities, and technical skills.

Limitations

While the emphasis on publicly open social media groups allows me to gain insight into online political participation of the broadest population of emigrants with varying degrees of social capital and skills, this approach can by no means encompass all relevant virtual spaces, and therefore the results of this study should be interpreted with some level of caution. Since closed social media venues were excluded and the study does not claim to capture an exhaustive list of all possible public virtual spaces, the results of the analysis do not show the complete picture of emigrant political engagement. Other virtual spaces not included in the study, such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, may attract different categories of individuals based on various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, such as age,

education, and physical location. In other words, based on differences in gender, age, ethnicity, and occupation, individuals may be actively involved in political conversations beyond the scope of my sample. In addition, since online groups included in the analysis are public, their members may fear surveillance and persecution and refrain from posting certain political content, particularly if they reside in authoritarian states.

Ethical Considerations

While the use of social media platforms that facilitate the creation and sharing of online content among users is increasingly prevalent in social research, there are some concerns about the ethical aspect of using social media for data collection and analysis. In an effort to present research findings in an ethical manner, several precautions were taken in preparation of this chapter. First, the research was limited to publicly open social media groups and pages without any password or membership restrictions, meaning that any internet user had access to the texts. Second, the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed by eliminating any identifying markers, such as profile pictures and usernames, from the analysis, and by refraining from using direct quotes which could be traced back to the author in the text.

Lastly, this study does not investigate any individual commentary made on social media or specific activities of any particular diasporic organization or community. Instead, the purpose of this research is to look at the bigger picture by exploring aggregate textual data, as well as interpreting general patterns of migrants' engagement on social media platforms.

Vertical Political Engagement

The political discourse of Kyrgyz emigrants on social media can be categorized into two distinct types: vertical and horizontal. The former denotes messages initiated by site administrators representing organized diaspora organizations or political leaders.

Several groups and pages on platforms such as Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki are managed by specific diaspora organizations, where administrators have control over page settings, deciding which posts are published, ignored, or deleted. They also regulate membership by determining who can join the group and who may be excluded or expelled.

For instance, the Council of Kyrgyz Diaspora is a civil society organization registered in Russia, running pages on various social media platforms, including Facebook. The organization employs these virtual spaces to disseminate information about its activities, such as events, news updates, and services. Notably, its social media presence emphasizes close collaborations with the Kyrgyz embassy, as well as government agencies in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan. This is evident through pictures featuring prominent government officials and reposts of content from state-run media sources. Despite having a follower count exceeding 3,500, the level of interpersonal conversations or other forms of engagement on this organization's virtual spaces, such as likes, or shares, remains minimal. To a large extent, this is because only site administrators can post content, which means that group members cannot bring forward ideas, questions, or concerns or otherwise initiate conversations. Similar patterns are observed on social media pages managed by other diaspora organizations such as Burimdik, as well as smaller regional diaspora organizations such as Yntymak and Manas in Yakutia, Russia, or the Kyrgyz Community Centre in Chicago. Consequently, these virtual spaces exhibit a vertical organization, where information flows from administrators—the leadership of diaspora groups—to their online followers. In other words, members of these pages are passive consumers rather than active participants in political discussions. Analysing the vertical organization of these diaspora organization-run pages on social media platforms reveals a power dynamic that limits the participatory nature of discussions within these virtual spaces. The control wielded by administrators over content creation and membership represents a top-down approach, where the dissemination of information is centralized and driven by the organization's lead-

ership. This hierarchical structure hinders open dialogue, which raises questions about the role of formalized diaspora organizations and politicians associated with them in promoting certain political ideas and candidates for office. Indeed, a number of political entrepreneurs, including Sadyr Zhaparov, have utilized these structures to distribute their messages.

Many groups and pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte represent political figures, although, when looking at their following, it is difficult to discern the emigrant and local Kyrgyz population. Sadyr Zhaparov's incredible rise to power has often been attributed to his popularity on social media (Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020). Journalists and scholars alike have pointed to Zhaparov's immense social media presence as one of the main ingredients of his political success (Doolotkeldieva 2021). Indeed, there are dozens of Zhaparov fan pages across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp among others, with thousands, sometimes tens or even hundreds of thousands, of members and followers. Some YouTube videos featuring Zhaparov received hundreds of thousands of views within the span of a few days during the October 2020 mass protests. While the exact numbers are not known, it has been established that emigrants comprise a significant proportion of Japarov's followers online (Ryskulova 2021), and some of the most active users announcing their support for or opposition to the new leader were Kyrgyz emigrants in Russia, the US, and other countries (Esenmanova 2021). During the October 2020 revolution and the subsequent change of government in Kyrgyzstan, online activity within Kyrgyz emigrant groups experienced a significant surge. Members of these groups took to social media platforms to post, share, and comment on the elections, protests, and political developments unfolding in their home country. This period witnessed a dynamic range of discussions, reflecting diverse opinions and perspectives among Kyrgyz emigrants.

The official and fan pages and groups of political leaders, including President Zhaparov, represent a form of vertical

political engagement for two reasons. First, similarly to the diaspora organization pages described above, they adopt a top-down approach, meaning that the content is created and monitored by site administrators. Second, although at first glance it might seem as if the members are engaging in genuine conversations in the comment section, a more critical look reveals bots and trolls who spread distorted versions of political news and conspiracy theories. Analysis of the rhetorical patterns, sentence structure, and word choice of comments reveals that identical statements are often posted by different accounts, or the same account reshares identical comments across multiple groups and platforms. In addition, analysis of such accounts' activities shows that they do not create personal posts or generate constructive ideas; rather, they tend to repost third-party content. These patterns of online behaviour are tell-tale signs of the presence of bots and trolls that attempt to manipulate online discussions, public opinion, and ultimately voting behaviour. These findings have been corroborated by multiple investigations conducted by independent journalists in Kyrgyzstan (Titova et al. 2020; Eshalieva 2020). The bots and trolls tend to target opposition politicians, activists, and civil society organizations; they also harass and intimidate users who are critical of Zhaparov and his government on social media. Therefore, the work of 'troll factories' attempts to imitate genuine expression of political views and interpersonal conversations, but their messages are in essence vertical because they promote a predetermined narrative and limit the direction and scope of the discussion.

Vertical political engagement is not limited to pro-regime propaganda: the top-down spread of information via social media can also stem from opposition politicians, activists, parties, and civil society organizations. Thus, while there has been a notable level of support for Sadyr Zhaparov since his rise to power in 2020, it is crucial to highlight that there have also been numerous voices within these conversations questioning his legitimacy and authority. This indicates the heterogeneous nature of political attitudes among Kyrgyz emigrants. These differences can be

traced both *among host countries*, with higher levels of support for Zhaparov among emigrants in Russia compared with those in the US or the EU member states, as well as *within emigrant communities*. Amid this contention, several social media accounts run by emigrant influencers, including student activists studying abroad and anonymous site administrators, such as Tajadym, emerged as significant actors of vertical political engagement. Similarly to administrators of diaspora organizations and political figures' social media pages, these influencers create content to set agendas for political conversations, allowing their followers to like, share, or comment but not to post within the page or group. Although bots and trolls were present in the comment section, similarly to those under the posts of Sadyr Zhaparov and other political figures, genuine commentary from real users was prominent. Therefore, despite the vertical structure and the agenda-setting and narrative-shaping nature of social media pages curated by activists and civil society organizations, these spaces provided comparatively more room for discussions and debates surrounding the political developments in Kyrgyzstan following the October Revolution.

The juxtaposition of the top-down nature of administrator-run diasporic organization and state-sponsored social media pages promoting Zhaparov's populist ideas with the emigrant online activists who are actively generating anti-Zhaparov content underscores the complexities within the Kyrgyz diaspora's political landscape and provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of the Kyrgyz emigrant community's political engagement. Furthermore, the emergence of the rival discourse highlights the evolving nature of political participation facilitated by social media platforms. Both incumbent politicians and opposition activists use their online presence and platforms to actively disseminate information, express dissenting views, and mobilize support for alternative political narratives. Their influence extends beyond the confines of closed groups and reaches a wider audience, potentially shaping the perceptions and opinions of Kyrgyz emigrants who may not participate actively in politics otherwise.

However, it is important to recognize that those engaged in online political discussions represent only a segment of the Kyrgyz emigrant population. Their rhetoric should not be seen as universally representative of the entire diaspora's political sentiments, since it cannot reflect the full range of opinions within the broader Kyrgyz emigrant community. In sum, these findings demonstrate that vertical social media messages can promote illiberal sentiments among emigrant populations that are susceptible to populist and nationalist rhetoric. However, at the same time, social media is a venue where opposing narratives are constructed by civil society organizations, independent media groups, and local and emigrant political activists. In other words, neither the liberal nor the illiberal forces can claim a monopoly on vertical narrative-making in the virtual space. Instead, social media has become a key arena of political struggle, in which diaspora populations are both creators and consumers of political content.

Horizontal Political Engagement

Horizontal political engagement on social media is characterized by an egalitarian structure of membership and the equal ability of every member to raise a question or start a new conversation. In other words, in a horizontal form of online participation, agenda-setting power is distributed among all members. In this environment, a conversation emerges spontaneously among the members of a group and under certain conditions might lead to real-life political organizing. This form of political participation among emigrants can be categorized into two forms: (1) discourse around emigrants' connection to the homeland, such as identity, belonging, and national pride, and (2) crisis-triggered political organizing.

Identity, Belonging, and National Pride

The significant engagement observed in relation to posts promoting national pride and nostalgia for the homeland highlights the

deep emotional connection and sense of identity among Kyrgyz emigrants. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors, including the desire to maintain a connection with familial roots, to preserve cultural heritage, and to reaffirm collective identity. These posts, which often feature content from news agencies and other websites highlighting Kyrgyz culture and achievements, attract high levels of engagement, including likes, shares, and comments. This indicates that the diaspora community discussions aim at maintaining connections with the homeland.

One example of this phenomenon is the discussion observed on the Facebook page of the Kyrgyz diaspora in New York. A post promoting the launch of a popular Kyrgyz dairy snack product called 'kurut' in the United States sparked a lengthy conversation among group members. This conversation not only focused on the product itself but also delved into personal stories, memories, and shared experiences related to Kyrgyzstan. Such interactions demonstrate how food and cultural practices can serve as powerful catalysts in fostering a sense of unity and nostalgia within the diaspora community. The positive reception of success stories featuring Kyrgyz celebrities further illustrates the impact of online engagement on sense of belonging and national pride. Posts about individuals such as Eduard Kubatov, who became the first Kyrgyz person to climb Mount Everest, Azamat Asangul, a ballet dancer with a New York company, and Ultimate Fighting Championship champion Valentina Shevchenko generate numerous likes, shares, and enthusiastic comments. These narratives not only celebrate individual accomplishments but also symbolize the achievements and potential of the people and the nation as a whole, instilling a sense of collective pride among the diaspora community.

The prevalence of social media content revolving around Kyrgyz history, culture, and identity indicates a deep-rooted connection to the homeland. While posts related to migrants' everyday issues, such as employment, housing, and documentation, tend to be one-way advertisements or requests for assistance, it is discussions on matters of identity and patriotism that foster substantial inter-member debates and conversations, albeit less frequently.

This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights how migrants' memories and celebrations of their homeland play a vital role in strengthening their sense of belonging and maintaining their connection with their ethnic, cultural, and national identities. In sum, the high levels of engagement observed on posts promoting national pride, cultural heritage, and Kyrgyz achievements on social media platforms reflect the emotional connection and sense of identity within the Kyrgyz diaspora community. These discussions foster a sense of unity, nostalgia, and belonging among group members. Moreover, the emphasis on national pride has implications for political engagement, as it intertwines cultural identity with political discussions and influences the diaspora's perspectives and actions related to their homeland. Understanding the role of national pride and cultural identity in online conversations provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the Kyrgyz emigrants' political engagement and how these discussions foster a sense of solidarity and collective identity among participants, laying the groundwork for collective action.

The Kyrgyz diaspora community across the globe demonstrated unprecedented levels of cross-border, cross-channel online-to-offline political activism during two recent crisis situations: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict.

Crisis-Triggered Political Organizing: COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has spanned the globe since the winter of 2019 and reached its peak in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2020. During the so-called 'Dark July', the number of daily new coronavirus infection cases reached over 1,000—a very high number for a country with a population of 6.5 million. The poorly equipped healthcare system was unable to adequately meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of cases, and a great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of young volunteers and medical students (Imanalieva 2020). The public health crisis triggered a burst of activity in Kyrgyz emigrant social media groups, which was not limited to just conversations but materialized into real-life

fundraising and organizing for the purchase of medical equipment and devices and the shipping of it back to different regions, cities, and villages in Kyrgyzstan.

Coordinated networks of emigrant activists were formed across borders and used multiple forms of social media to communicate with each other and with their collaborators and beneficiaries in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, Facebook was often used for raising awareness and promoting fundraising campaigns, messenger services such as WhatsApp served as tools for managing logistics communications, and Instagram was used to visually demonstrate impacts at the local street level. Ideas and conversations that started online spilled over to the real world, and the results of this complex cooperation within and among the diaspora communities were tangible. For instance, Kyrgyz emigrants in the United States gathered money for meals and masks for medical staff in Bishkek. They also collaborated with domestic activists and funded research and the installation of prototypes of locally made oxygen machines in hospitals and COVID-19 units where proper commercial medical equipment was unavailable.

Therefore, the pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented level of activism that transcended continental borders, simultaneously utilizing different types of social networks for the same projects and thinning the line between online and offline participation. This form of political engagement has two important consequences. On the one hand, it promotes close links between diaspora communities and their homelands, as well as enhancing emigrant citizenship and helping to nurture humanitarian, egalitarian, and liberal values. However, on the other hand, the crises that induce emigrant online-offline activism also expose corruption at different levels of government, as well as the ineptitude of the state in handling social welfare problems, which are well-known supply-side factors that lead to disillusionment with established institutions, give rise to the soaring popularity of anti-establishment politicians, and facilitate a turn towards populist authoritarianism. Indeed, just a few months after 'Dark July', the

October Revolution ousted Sooronbai Zheenbekov and brought to power Sadyr Zhaparov.

Crisis-Triggered Political Organizing: the Kyrgyz–Tajik Border Conflict

In late April 2021 and then again in January and September 2022, multiple episodes of violence erupted on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border, with dozens killed or injured during the clashes. Images and videos of the violence, alongside burning houses, schools, and shops, began circulating on social media. In response, Kyrgyz emigrant groups on various social media platforms actively participated in raising global awareness of the conflict. For instance, using foreign language skills to translate local news, they attempted to bring the issue to the attention of their host countries and international organizations through social media and online petitions. Hashtags such as #stopRahmon and #stoptajikagression quickly proliferated and spilled over to the real world as they became the slogans for street-level protests and demonstrations organized by Kyrgyz emigrants in their host countries, including at the United Nations building in New York as well as in Germany, France, the UK, and elsewhere. This case demonstrates that the accessibility and immediacy of the horizontal form of online communication facilitates the dissemination of information and the organization of collective action. Through social media channels, individuals can swiftly disseminate news, updates, and calls to action. This rapid flow of information galvanizes community members to mobilize and participate in offline activities, including protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, online political engagement serves as a gateway to offline participation by providing a platform for the recruitment and organization of activists. Within immigrant communities, online networks serve as a nexus for connecting geographically dispersed individuals, coordinating collective action, and mobilizing in the offline physical realm.

In the immediate aftermath of the border conflict, diasporic groups started multiple fundraising initiatives for the

reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and humanitarian aid for the victims of violence in their homeland, paralleling the pandemic-related fundraising campaigns two years prior. The interactive and egalitarian nature of horizontal political engagement fosters a sense of community and collective identity among diaspora members, catalysing engagement with humanitarian causes. The narratives, images, and rapid updates regarding the plight of the homeland galvanized the sense of empathy and solidarity among participants, which served as a driving force behind fundraising efforts, as individuals felt compelled to contribute to the alleviation of suffering and reconstruction of the homeland. Importantly, the transparency and immediacy of online platforms enhances the accountability and credibility of fundraising campaigns, thereby bolstering trust and encouraging participation. Diaspora groups leverage social media to disseminate detailed information regarding the intended use of funds, project milestones, and impact assessments. On the one hand, this transparency and efficiency enhances the sense of citizenship through contribution by diaspora members; yet on the other hand, it also highlights the lack of state capacity to respond adequately to humanitarian crises.

In sum, the cases of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict produced a series of forceful catalysts for transnational online-to-offline political participation, street-level mobilization, and fundraising for humanitarian causes, with real-life implications. Both case studies presented here show that emigrants' online engagement is undoubtedly a legitimate form of participation in homeland politics that transcends not only state borders but also multiple channels, including various types of social media and communication tools, as well as crossing over from the virtual to the physical realm. The cases also highlight the importance of social media platforms in the exercise of emigrant citizenship and their utility in providing a space for diaspora communities to actively engage in the political life of the home nation via multiple channels that spill over to the offline world and have tangible real-life consequences.

Conclusion

The rise of illiberalism has become a major concern in the contemporary political world. The role of social media in this context has been of particular interest, as it has been both hailed as a tool for democratization and criticized for facilitating the spread of illiberal ideas and practices. The connection between emigrants' online political participation and the rise of illiberalism is a complex one, as demonstrated by the case studies of Kyrgyz emigrants. While the case studies of vertical and horizontal political engagement among Kyrgyz emigrants presented in this chapter definitively show that it is an impactful form of political participation, yet the question of whether or not cross-border online political participation challenges illiberal institutions or adds to their resiliency cannot be answered definitively.

First, the Kyrgyz emigrant population is characterized by a diversity of backgrounds, encompassing differences in race, ethnicity, education, occupation, and various other socioeconomic aspects. This diversity translates into variations in political preferences and voting behaviour, both within and among host countries. The 2021 presidential elections highlighted stark differences in support for Sadyr Zhaparov between emigrants in the US, Canada, and Europe, and those in Russia. This illustrates how emigrants, just like domestic voters, can exhibit a range of political tendencies. Some may be susceptible to populist rhetoric and favour strongman leaders, aligning with illiberal sentiments, while others leverage their presence on social media and exercise their voting power to resist authoritarianism. This diversity of political perspectives and engagement among emigrants adds complexity to the overall impact of their online political participation.

Second, social media has become a battleground where liberal and illiberal forces vie for influence on public opinion and electoral outcomes. Its decentralized nature presents challenges for authoritarian governments seeking to maintain direct control over the flow of information. This has created opportunities for civil society activists and marginalized voices to use social media as a

platform to challenge the status quo and advocate for change. The ability to disseminate content quickly and widely enables these actors to raise awareness about social and political issues, mobilize support, and foster a sense of community around shared goals.

By leveraging social media, civil society activists can amplify their voices and reach audiences that may have been inaccessible through traditional media outlets. They can expose government abuses and corruption, highlight human rights violations, and shed light on injustices that are often ignored or suppressed. Through the power of storytelling, compelling visuals, and personal narratives, activists can evoke empathy, build solidarity, and mobilize collective action.

However, the same platforms that empower civil society activists also provide avenues for illiberal regimes to advance their own agendas. Authoritarian governments have recognized the influence of social media and have sought to exploit it for their own benefit. They employ tactics such as constructing narratives that discredit opposition voices, promoting state propaganda, and engaging in coordinated disinformation campaigns. State-sponsored 'troll factories' and bots are deployed to spread misinformation, conspiracy theories, and divisive content that undermine liberal ideas and institutions. These efforts aim to manipulate public opinion, sow confusion, and undermine the credibility of critical voices. The vulnerability of social media to manipulation and distortion by those in power underscores the challenges facing online political participation as a tool for resistance against illiberalism. The democratizing potential of social media is tempered by the risks of surveillance, censorship, and online harassment. Governments can monitor online activities, identify dissenters, and target them for retribution. Algorithms and content moderation policies may be influenced or manipulated by political interests, leading to the suppression of dissenting voices or the amplification of propaganda.

Moreover, the sheer volume and diversity of information on social media can contribute to the spread of misinformation and the fragmentation of public discourse. Echo chambers and filter

bubbles can isolate individuals within their own ideological bubbles, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. This polarization can impede productive dialogue and collective problem-solving, hindering efforts to challenge illiberalism effectively.

In navigating these challenges, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of online political participation on illiberal institutions is multifaceted and context dependent. To fully understand the implications of cross-border online political participation, it is important to consider the broader social, political, and economic context within which it operates. Socioeconomic inequalities, political polarization, and historical grievances can shape the dynamics of online political discourse and its real-life outcomes.

Third, social media platforms have emerged as vital spaces for emigrant political participation, facilitating the formation and development of emigrant citizenship. The case studies reveal the spillover effects of online conversations, demonstrating how discussions and interactions on social media can extend beyond the virtual realm to offline organizing for humanitarian aid and protest activities. This highlights the transformative potential of social media in empowering emigrants to actively intervene in domestic and international affairs of their homeland, thereby asserting their citizenship rights and engaging in the nation-building process. Emigrants, through their active participation on social media, challenge the notion of being absent citizens. Despite the physical distance from their home country, emigrants remain connected and engaged through these digital platforms. The digital age has enabled emigrants to maintain strong ties with their homeland and play an influential role, particularly during times of crisis such as the October Revolution in 2020 and the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. In moments of political and social upheaval, social media has become a powerful tool for emigrants to express their opinions, share information, and mobilize collective action.

Emigrant political participation on social media contributes to the larger nation-building project, which is a crucial precursor

for democratization. By actively engaging in discussions, debates, and advocacy, emigrants contribute to shaping the narrative surrounding their homeland and its political trajectory. Moreover, emigrant political participation on social media transcends borders, allowing emigrants in different countries to connect and collaborate. This transnational engagement facilitates the exchange of ideas, experiences, and resources, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective agency. The virtual space provided by social media platforms also enables emigrants to challenge traditional power structures and hierarchies. Emigrants can bypass official channels and institutions to voice their concerns directly to a wider audience, including policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and domestic voters. This direct engagement can exert pressure on home governments to address emigrants' needs and concerns, thus influencing policy decisions and promoting greater inclusivity. However, it is important to acknowledge that emigrant political participation on social media is not without its challenges and limitations. Emigrants may encounter obstacles such as censorship, surveillance, or harassment, particularly if they reside in authoritarian regimes. The influence of social media is also not evenly distributed, as factors such as digital access, language barriers, and socioeconomic disparities can shape the extent and impact of emigrants' online participation.

Lastly, social media platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating emigrant political participation and the formation of emigrant citizenship. Through online conversations, emigrants actively intervene in domestic and international affairs, demonstrating their political presence and contributing to the nation-building project. Emigrant political participation on social media holds transformative potential, empowering emigrants to assert their rights, advocate for change, and contribute to democratization efforts in their homeland. However, it is crucial to recognize the challenges and limitations that accompany emigrant political participation and to continue exploring ways to amplify emigrant voices and ensure their meaningful inclusion in political processes.

Notes

1 For a discussion of non-state illiberal activism on social media see Abdoubaetova (2022).
2 Based on my analysis of polling data from the Central Electoral Commission (n.d.).

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CHAPTER 7

Weaponizing Migration in Illiberal Autocracies

The 2015–2016 Russian Arctic Route and the Belarus–EU Border Crisis since 2021

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Abstract

Thousands of asylum seekers have sought to cross the border to Europe from Russia to Norway and Finland during 2015–2016 and through Belarus since 2021. This migration at the EU's external borders encapsulates the geopolitical and weaponizing potential of global migration for authoritarian illiberal states. In this chapter, we argue that both the migration from Russia during the

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2015–2016 'migration crisis' and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Polish border since 2021 reveal interesting perspectives on the EU's and its member states' responses to both migration and its instrumentalization, as well as on liberalism and illiberalism in global migration. Both the illiberal Russian and Belarusian states and the responses of Finland and Poland as EU member states feature key characteristics of illiberalism and demonstrate the contradictory character and the effectiveness of these attempts at coercive engineered migration.

Keywords: weaponizing migration, Russia, Belarus, EU, illiberal autocracies, border crisis, Arctic Route

Introduction

Thousands of asylum seekers have sought to cross the border to Europe from Russia to Norway and Finland during 2015–2016 and through Belarus since 2021. This migration at the EU's external border encapsulates the geopolitical and weaponizing potential of global migration for authoritarian illiberal states. Curiously, it also makes explicit the illiberal migration and border policies of the EU and its member states, indicating the multifaceted nature of migration and border management and complex relations between liberalism and illiberalism. By scrutinizing the ways that migration from Russia (2015–2016) and Belarus (since 2021) have taken place and how the two illiberal authoritarian states have instrumentalized migration as part of their foreign policy, we uncover interesting features of migration in foreign policymaking, as well as of the characteristics of liberalism and illiberalism. With a temporary 'opening' of the border for asylum seekers in northern Russia, Russia arguably tested Finland's and the EU's capacity to act during the 2015–2016 'migration crisis'. Five years later, Lukashenka's government in Belarus went further by organizing transportation of third-country nationals to Belarus, forcefully pushing asylum seekers to the borders of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, and by force denying them the possibility

to return once their entry to the EU's territory was denied (e.g. Wilczek 2021).

Besides ordering its border guard to 'open' the state territorial border, a high-capacity state can also mobilize consulates, national airlines, travel agencies, and other state and non-state actors for the implementation of what Greenhill (2010, 2016) calls coercive engineered migration (abbreviated to CEM). In illiberal political contexts, long traditions of informal practices and corruption enable the mobilization of non-state actors and networks in the migration process, and the poor state of migrants' rights enables their treatment as pawns in a political game. In this chapter, we argue that both the migration from Russia during the 2015–2016 'migration crisis' and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Polish border since 2021 reveal interesting perspectives on the EU's and its member states' responses to both migration and its instrumentalization, as well as on liberalism and illiberalism in global migration. Both the illiberal Russian and Belarusian states and the responses of Finland and Poland as EU member states feature key characteristics of illiberalism and demonstrate the contradictory character and effectiveness of the CEM attempts.

The chapter follows the book's overall definition of illiberalism as the rejection of the superiority of the Western liberal-democratic model. State authorities in both Russia and Belarus have systematically emphasized their sovereignty, cultural cohesion, and uniqueness, demonstrating only selective commitment to international norms, democratic political institutions, and liberal policymaking. Illiberal societies are aggravated by unofficial networks, informality, corruption, and weak institutional trust. Russia and Belarus have long traditions of such practices, and their public opposition to Western liberal-democratic values has become a central element of state-making and nation-building. In these states, liberal elements have been present in pockets, against the dominant backdrop of illiberalism promoted by the Lukashenka and Putin regimes. The European Union, in contrast, has traditionally been considered a bastion of liberalism. However, illiberal tendencies have been strengthening in Europe in recent

years, especially in the field of migration policy (Natter 2021). The societal contradictions triggered by the 2015–2016 'refugee crisis' in Europe and the EU's and its member states' attempts to prevent illegal border crossings illustrate the sensitive and political character of migration, and the formation of a strongly criticized 'Fortress Europe'. These responses demonstrate the political vulnerability of European societies on occasions of the weaponization of migration and underline the arbitrary nature of the supposedly liberal character of the EU.

Russian and Belarusian rulers do not hide their anti-Western and illiberal attitudes. The chapter agrees with those who argue that Western discourses and practices during the 2015–2016 and 2021 'migration crises' indicate the prevalence of tacit illiberalism in the sphere of migration governance by restricting migrants' socioeconomic and political rights (Natter 2021). Although the European Union was founded on liberal values such as human dignity, democracy, freedom, and human rights, it has kept its borders closed for third-country migrants and even many asylum seekers. Within this broader context of liberalism and illiberalism, we ask: what do these 'migration episodes' of 2015–2016 and 2021 onwards tell us about the nexus of migration and illiberalism in the contexts of the authoritarian Russia and Belarus, and of the supposedly liberal EU and its member states? Does migration challenge or strengthen illiberalism?

To answer the above questions, the chapter draws on secondary sources and a qualitative analysis of primary sources consisting of state-affiliated and independent media reports and official statements by state authorities. The study uses material published in Finland, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and the European Union, making a many-sited platform for the analysis. In the case of Russia, the study is based primarily on material and findings drawing attention to the 'narrow conception of security' in the Finnish discourses of the Arctic Route migration, and informal practices and the weak rule of law in Russia as a background to this migration. The case of Belarus demonstrates Lukashenka's illiberal authoritarian regime and how it utilized migration to put pressure

on the EU. This was a textbook example of CEM, but Europe's response provides an insight into the hypocritic character of the liberal EU and the rare success in resisting the coercive attempt (Greenhill 2016). While Finland's public discussion on the Arctic Route focused solely on geopolitics, hybrid influence, and political solution with Russia, Poland's response went further. It sent armed soldiers to the border, built a barbed-wire border fence, and announced a state of emergency in its border municipalities. In both cases, migration was presented as a hybrid attack against Europe. Thus, Poland marginalized migration-related activism and demobilized the 'pro-migrant/refugee community' (Greenhill 2016, 31–32). In these contexts of the 'liberal' European Union, the responses were clearly illiberal—if not necessarily undemocratic (Natter 2021, 113).

Illiberalism, Authoritarian States, and the Weaponization of Migration

The nexus between illiberalism, authoritarian governance, and the instrumentalization—or even weaponization—of migration is easily observable. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Belarus have developed into authoritarian states that question and challenge the hegemony of Western liberalism. Russia's current state ideology, emphasizing conservative values and anti-Western sentiments, has developed gradually since the late 1990s. The division between Western-oriented (*zapadniki*) and more conservative Eurasian ideologies, declaring Russia as a separate civilization in between Europe and Asia, has a long history in Russian political thought. Since the early 1990s, when the Russian state was looking for a new national idea, or a national ideology, the varied aspects of the past and possible paths of nationhood have been discussed. The Russian state has come to emphasize not only its separate civilization between the East and the West and its traditional values and conservatism but, increasingly, its role in a global movement against Western liberalism. In Belarus, the brief period of democratization in the early 1990s ended

when Lukashenka ascended to power and moved to consolidate his authoritarian rule, a process which was completed by the early 2000s (Wilson 2011). Anti-Westernism was one of the ideological underpinnings of Lukashenka's rule from early on and has only intensified in the aftermath of the mass protests that erupted in 2020 (Kazharski and Makarychev 2021).

Marlene Laruelle (2016) identifies different periods in the gradual elaboration of conservatism and anti-Western ideology in Russia's state posture. During the first years of 'patriotic centrism', when the state was still calling for stabilization and global revival, neither liberalism nor communism provided sufficient ground for a state ideology. The slow recovery of Russia's confidence in the 2000s, combined with the centralization of power, led to a gradual institutionalization of conservatism as a state posture. During Putin's second (2004–2008) and Medvedev's (2008–2012) presidential terms, the state utilized the Yeltsin-era economic and political chaos, colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), mass protests against the government in 2011–2012, and the prosecution of Pussy Riot as resources for anti-liberal and anti-Western politics. The 'conservative turn' in Russian politics has also signalled an increased reliance on the country's conservative electorate at the expense of urban liberal votes (Smyth and Soboleva 2014). Protesters tried to bring liberal voices to the centralized political atmosphere which has contributed to the rapid closing of the political space in Russia. With a clear fear of liberal political activism, the Russian government turned increasingly to patriotism, traditional values, and spirituality as primary values of Russianness. Since then, such interpretations have been supported by repressive legislation and pressure on civil society (Sharafutdinova 2014; Laine and Silvan 2021).

In Belarus, anti-Westernism was rooted in Lukashenka's battle against the nationalist and democratic opposition. Relations with Western states and institutions had deteriorated as early as 1996, when Lukashenka's usurpation of power was condemned in the West following the 1995 and 1996 referenda (Hill 2005). Although Belarus' relations with the West have since then witnessed several

'thaws', Lukashenka's anti-Western policies and authoritarian practices have persisted until the present day. In the aftermath of the contested presidential election of 2020, which President Lukashenka blamed on the West, Lukashenka's anti-Westernism has gained new extremes. In September of that year, he claimed that the protests against him had been organized by the United States and 'its satellites—Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and unfortunately, Ukraine', trying to organize a so-called 'colour revolution' with the goal of 'violating our sovereignty and even our territorial integrity' (Lukashenka, quoted in RFE/RL 2020). Russia's support for Lukashenka's government has increased in both rhetoric and practice since the summer of 2020, which stresses Belarus' support for and proximity to Russia (Shraibman 2022).

Russia and Belarus have become personalist authoritarian states with power centralized in the hands of the presidents and their administrations. Such authoritarian regimes often turn to international law as a means of shielding themselves from criticism and actively promoting their illiberal projects, extending legal norms that exist alongside and compete with democratic principles (Ginsburg 2020). With a secondary interest in the rule of law and rule-based international order, such states may use any matters, including migration, as a means of 'soft power' in international relations. Kelly Greenhill (2010, 2016) even talks about the deliberate weaponization of migration, defined as the instrumentalization and intentional political use of migration as a foreign policy bargaining chip. For her, this CEM is a 'weapon of a weak': a tool for a relatively weak and most likely illiberal challenger that both overcomes the powerful target's reluctance to negotiate and levels the playing field to achieve political, economic, or military goals (Greenhill 2016, 27–28). With migration as a political tool, states can threaten, intimidate, and blackmail other states with no direct involvement of military forces. They may cause tensions and contradictions and create crises with territorial or foreign policy aims. Even though Greenhill identifies over 50 different cases where migrants have been utilized as 'weapons', she does admit that the 'migration weapon' does not always work. Yet, as

the 'refugee crises' of 2015–2016 and 2021 onwards on the borders of Russia and Belarus demonstrate, many European governments define geopolitics and migration as the primary issues of security and national defence. These were issues that were also to challenge the future of the entire European Union. The 'illegal' border crossings and the 'uncontrolled' migration created or facilitated by the EU's neighbours challenged the sovereignty of states on one hand, and the EU's and its member states' integrity on the other. This made CEM at least a useful tool for generating crises and political confusion, even if this was not necessarily fully successful.

Greenhill's explicit portrayal of migration as a 'bomb', a 'weapon', and a 'weapon of mass destruction' has faced strong criticism. Marder (2018) argues that such militaristic metaphors do not serve the intended purpose but dangerously weaponize (sic) migration and undermine the possible solutions to 'the problem'. Such militarized concepts also leave little room for a more complex understanding of migration and refugees' humanity and, as two of the authors of this chapter argue elsewhere (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b), migrants' own actorness. Keeping these limitations in mind, we argue that such metaphors may still clarify the important ways in which illiberal authoritarian states frame migration as an instrument of international politics. For our scrutiny, what are especially interesting are the ways that the Russian and Belarusian cases relate to the usefulness of CEM despite differences in responses to it and in possibilities for measuring the complete success or failure of the cases (see Greenhill 2016, 30–31).

For this, Greenhill's (2016, 4, 2010, 132) concept of 'hypocrisy costs' is particularly insightful. She suggests that the hypocrisy costs of weaponization are 'symbolic political costs that can be imposed when there exists a real or perceived disparity between a professed commitment to liberal values and norms and demonstrated actions that contravene such a commitment'. In the context of the European Union, Russia and Belarus have repeatedly addressed the de facto disparity between the EU's overt commitment to the pronounced common values of human dignity,

freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights and the actual realization of those values in the EU's practices, and at its external borders in particular. Such claims correspond to broader critiques pointing to the de facto human rights violations of the EU, its member states, and its institutions (e.g. Frontex) in the Mediterranean Sea.

Fakhry, Parkes, and Rácz (2022) argue that migration can be instrumentalized as a 'cheap' strategy of international politics and as a tool of geopolitics, nation-building, counter-diplomacy, and hybrid warfare. Within this framework, the instrumentalization of migration is a part of broader hybrid action that, according to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (2022), 'is characterized by ambiguity as hybrid actors blur the usual borders of international politics and operate in the interfaces between external and internal, legal and illegal, and peace and war'. That ambiguity combines conventional but also alternative forms of politics such as disinformation campaigns, intervention in political debates or elections, interruptions of or attacks against critical infrastructure, cyberoperations, criminal activities, and even the use of the military. What makes migration instrumentalization different from 'classical' hybrid tools is its explicit nature. This instrumentalization becomes significant only if it is open and the public clearly links it with the perpetrator's capacity to stop it (Fakhry, Parkes and Rácz 2022, 10). This was exactly what happened in February 2016 when Russia decided to end the use of the Arctic Route to Finland, after governmental and presidential negotiations between Finnish and Russian authorities. What is curious is that the strategy of 'crisis generation' (Greenhill 2016, 28) was employed by an actor that is supposedly stronger than its target.

The Arctic Route from Russia to Finland

In the first case study of this chapter, we analyse the so-called Arctic Route from Russia to Finland in late 2015 and early 2016. This migratory route through Russia's Arctic areas to the EU

emerged during the so-called 'migration crises of Europe'. The route appeared when asylum seekers were, for the first time, able to enter Finland and Norway, and ultimately the EU and its Schengen area, through the suddenly 'opened' border crossing points in the Russian north. First the route ran through Moscow to the city of Murmansk in northern Russia and, further, to the Russian–Norwegian border and the Storskog border station in Norway. When the Norwegian authorities reached an agreement with Russia in November 2015 to not allow people without visas to cross the border to Norway (Moe and Rowe 2016), the asylum seekers turned towards Finland. Despite decades-old state agreements and existing practices of border management, Russian border officers allowed asylum seekers to exit Russia and enter the Finnish border stations of Raja-Jooseppi and Salla. Practically none of them had a valid Schengen visa.

During 2015–2016, Finland received about 38,000 asylum seekers. The majority entered Finland through the EU's internal borders, mainly through the Western Haparanda–Tornio border crossing point between Sweden and Finland. Less than 5 per cent of them (1,756 individuals) entered Finland through the Arctic Route and Russia (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 248). The use of the EU's external border in the north to enter the Schengen area was a new phenomenon but, as with the western border, it was part of the migratory movements to Europe from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019). Despite this broader context and the small number of asylum seekers arriving in Finland through the Arctic Route, the public and political discussion narrowly emphasized the route to be a threat caused by Russia. It was seen as a state-orchestrated test in which the Russian Federation was instrumentalizing migrants and asylum seekers to further its hybrid influence.

The ongoing broader migratory contexts were missing from the discussions, e.g., those of Russian and European migration processes and policies, Russia as a migrant-receiving country in international migration, migrants' and asylum seekers' actorness in the migration process, corruption and weak rule of law, and

the influences of informal networks of helpers, facilitators, and smugglers. The complex migratory phenomenon was analysed, handled, and solved narrowly as a geopolitical and border security issue. Next, we connect the instrumentalization discourse of the route to the aforementioned contextual and migratory characteristics. This helps in recognizing the potential space for instrumentalizing migration in Russia and on the route by making the migratory processes unpredictable and intentionally irregular.

In our study of the Arctic Route and CEM, we use media and other public reports. This material is also scrutinized with reference to our earlier empirical studies based on the application protocols of those who applied for asylum in Finland after entering the country. Two authors of this chapter have explained the protocol material in their earlier studies on the Arctic Route (Virkkunen, Piipponen, and Reponen 2019; Piipponen and Virkkunen 2020; Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b).

The Finnish public and political discussions portrayed the Arctic Route as an example of what Greenhill calls CEM by emphasizing that Russia used displaced persons as non-military instruments of state-level coercion and an element of international politics. However, instead of recognizing a clear and concrete objective for Russia's behaviour, the Finnish discussion evolved around Russia's hybrid influence, intimidation, and testing of EU's and Finland's response to the 'European migration crisis'. Questions related to border management were especially puzzling in the Finnish discussions: why did cooperation with the Russian Border Service suddenly fail, and why were migrants allowed to travel to and through the Russian border zone to Finland, and earlier to Norway, without valid Schengen visas (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019; Skön 2017; Moe and Rowe 2016)? This question arose from decades-old regulations of the border and border crossings, as well as well-functioning cooperation between the Finnish Border Guard and the Russian Border Service. The two border services had since the Soviet times developed a pragmatic and trustful professional relationship, performed through regular interaction along the strictly guarded Finnish–Russian border (Laine 2015,

133; Niemenkari 2002, 12–13). Antti Honkamaa (2016) in the Finnish tabloid newspaper *Iltalehti* wrote:

> Russian authorities are involved. Without the permission of the FSB, nothing happens at the Russian border. Local border guards and other authorities do what they are told to do, they do not make initiatives. According to the Finnish News Agency STT, asylum seekers are directed by the Kandalaksha city hall.

Even Minister of the Interior of Finland Petteri Orpo argued for the involvement of Russia: 'Since 1944 and until 2016, Finland and Russia had a peaceful border. So, something exceptional happened. And this happened only at the two northernmost borders, and there was the Norway episode before. This could not be a coincidence' (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019, 134).

Also, the cessation of the migration route in February 2016 happened immediately after President Putin's public address to the FSB, in which he spoke of the 'necessity to strengthen the control of refugee flows to Russia and through Russia to Europe' (Putin 2016). The Finnish Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs, together with the Finnish Border Guard, had been negotiating with their Russian counterparts for months (Huhta 2016a; 2016b). Yet only negotiation at the highest political level—the meeting of the presidents—brought a solution: a temporary six-month restriction for the two northernmost border crossing stations between Finland and Russia. Starting in April, only the citizens of Finland, Russia, and Belarus could then approach and cross the border (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019, 134).

Did the Russian state really plan the Arctic Route and make asylum seekers use it, or did it simply use the opportunities provided by the dynamic migratory movements in Europe and beyond? The Russian border guard 'opened' the border in late 2015, as many of the migrants in the protocol material expressed it, and ended up 'closing' it in February 2016, before the formal restriction came into effect. However, based on our earlier study of asylum application documents and different analyses of the route (Virkkunen, Piipponen, and Reponen 2019; Piipponen and

Virkkunen 2020; Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b), we argue that the Arctic Route was also a part of the broader global migration in which migrants, smugglers, and other helpers took advantage of the flight routes, relatively easy visa regulations, and travel agencies. In addition, rumours and hearsay about the route made it quickly a good option.

In contrast to how literature on CEM (Greenhill 2010, 2016) often lends support to migrants' passive role, the Arctic Route demonstrated that it is important not to downplay the actorness of the migrants and the role of the many other actors who made the route function. The repeated news and pictures of people and routes heading towards Europe through the Mediterranean and Russia, as well as images of Finland as a peaceful country of equality, human rights, education work, and welfare, lived a life of their own in different media and networks. All of this was enough to instruct and trick possible migrants to the north. Overall, migrants considered the Arctic Route safer and cheaper compared with the dangerous and, at that time, already very crowded Mediterranean and Balkan routes (see also Moe and Rowe 2016). The Russian state did not need to do much more than organize it so that migrants were exceptionally allowed to approach the border zone. Authorities did not systematically organize trips, transport migrants either to the north or to the border, or use violence or explicit coercion.

Even with this minor input, Russia managed to take full advantage of what Greenhill calls hypocrisy costs and argued that the route was actually the EU's own failure. The Russian prime minister at that time, Dmitry Medvedev, assessed the route from the perspective of the European human rights pact. According to him, Russia was not authorized to stop the migrants from travelling through Russia to the European Union and applying for asylum in 'the West': stopping their travel would have violated the regulations on human rights (Afhüppe and Brüggmann 2016; Huhta 2016b). At the same time, any scrutiny of how the migration policy of Russia had been implemented hardly lent support

to the view that the country had given such serious consideration to human rights.

In the context of Russia's 'informality environment' (Urinboyev 2016, 74) and the weak rule of law, non-elite labour migrants and refugees, whose life is characterized by their irregular status, need to discover strategies to cope with abusive authorities and business owners and to find solutions to their precarious everyday problems. Constantly changing laws and bureaucratic procedures and widespread corruption create a complex immigration legal regime that makes it difficult for migrants to follow the regulations. This pushes them even more into domains of irregularity and makes them vulnerable to cheating authorities, different kinds of racketeers, and random document checks by the police (Urinboyev 2021; Malakhov and Simon 2018; Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018; Reeves 2013). Such precarious conditions influenced migrants' decisions to join the transit migrants of the Arctic Route in 2015–2016 after living for years, even decades, in Russia.

The Arctic Route is a good example of instrumentalized migration. It also shows that narrowly framed securitization and weaponization narratives in Finland contributed to the hypocrisy costs based on the discrepancy between the declared liberal values on the one hand and the restrictive migration policy on the other hand. Such an approach silences the fact that irregular migration is a humanitarian matter combining different layers of security, actorness, and policymaking as well. The CEM was at least useful, even if rating its success is more challenging in this case than in the other cases that Greenhill (2016, 30–31) rates in her studies around the world. It is difficult to verify what was Russia's ultimate objective in relation to the Arctic Route in 2015–2016. Four years after the opening of the Arctic Route at the Finnish–Russian border, a similar migration phenomenon took place at the Belarus–Polish border in 2021, where Belarus took the instrumentalization of migration to a new level.

Belarus's Textbook Case of State-Generated Migration Crisis

The migration crisis on Belarus' borders with EU member states Lithuania and Poland was a textbook example of CEM, with tens of thousands of asylum seekers trying to enter the European Union via Belarus in the summer and autumn of 2021. What triggered the crisis was Belarusian authorities' promotion of Belarus as a gateway to the European Union. Lukashenka's administration relaxed its visa policy and organized direct flights from Middle Eastern cities to Minsk. Information about the new 'safe and easy' route to Europe started immediately to circulate in social media networks popular within the migrant community. Once migrants arrived at Minsk airport, state authorities assisted them in reaching the EU border and even crossing it, while complicating migrants' return from the border zones to Belarusian cities and their countries of origin (Łubiński 2022). At first, Belarusian officials directed most migrants to the border with Lithuania. However, after the Lithuanian Ministry of Interior issued an order legalizing the pushback of all 'irregularly' migrating people to Belarus on 11 August, Poland became the primary target. Its response was to declare a state of emergency on the border zone, which blocked aid groups, media, and civil society groups from entering the area and criminalized any attempts to help people stranded in the forest. The pushback was enabled by the adoption of new national legislation violating EU and international laws which state that anyone seeking protection must be given access to the asylum process (Bielecka 2022). Although Latvia, too, neighbours with Belarus, its border did not become a site of confrontation, possibly given the early restrictive measures introduced by its government.

The situation deteriorated in the autumn of 2021, as a growing number of migrants found themselves trapped in the border zone, unprepared for the approaching winter and inaccessible to organizations delivering humanitarian aid. News reports about migrants, including children, were spreading around the world, and criticism of the illiberal migration policy of Lithuania

and Poland increased, forcing EU officials to address migrants' plight by both restricting the routes to Belarus and engaging with Lukashenka. Although some migrants still attempt to cross to Europe via Belarus, the route lost much of its popularity when EU officials succeeded in pressuring Türkiye to restrict individuals of certain nationalities from buying tickets for flights to Belarus (Roth and O'Carroll 2021). In addition, after phone calls with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Lukashenka granted the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other international organizations access to provide humanitarian aid at the border and expand voluntary return opportunities to those stranded there (IOM 2021). However, given that Lukashenka's demands—the compelling objective of the lifting of sectoral sanctions, to be discussed below—were not met, we argue that the case is a rare instance of the *un*successful application of CEM (Greenhill 2016, 30).

The publicly available source material, consisting of reports by media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations, statements by the officials of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and the European Union, and migrants' accounts, suggest that Belarusian authorities used migrants to generate leverage vis-à-vis its neighbours and the EU in the context of worsening sanctions. As Maxim Samorukov (2021) argued at the time, Lukashenka sought 'to use the only language he understands—force—to try to reopen dialogue with the EU'. Following Greenhill (2010, 2016), Lukashenka resorted to CEM because it yielded him 'relative strength vis-à-vis a more powerful target state' (Greenhill 2016, 28) quickly and at a relatively low cost (Greenhill 2016, 29). Although Lukashenka's Belarus had never been a reliable partner for the EU, the post-2014 rapprochement between Belarus and the EU resulted in increased collaboration across sectors (Preiherman 2020), including in border management. Indeed, October 2016 witnessed the launch of the EU–Belarus Mobility Partnership and a gradual increase in cross-border collaboration. In July 2020, Belarus–EU visa facilitation and readmission agreements entered into force, 'represent[ing] an important step in strengthening

the EU's engagement with the Belarusian people and civil society' (European Commission 2020). Although Belarus had been a bystander during Europe's 'migration crisis' of 2015–2016, Lukashenka's statements in 2021, analysed below, suggest that he had identified migration as an Achilles heel of the EU. What is more, using vulnerable people, first and foremost political prisoners, as pawns in negotiations with the EU has been Lukashenka's strategy for decades (Bosse 2012).

The post-2014 thaw in EU–Belarus relations ended in August 2020, when Lukashenka claimed victory in a rigged presidential election and ordered unprecedentedly violent repression of the peaceful mass-scale protests that the election instantly sparked. The EU's response was 'slow and timid' (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021, 130). Although EU officials were quick to condemn Lukashenka's actions, it was the officials of Baltic states and Poland that were the first to take measures against Belarus (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021). The lack of a unified response was puzzling given the EU's long-term commitment to the promotion of liberal values in its neighbourhood. Instead of introducing sanctions, EU representatives sought to negotiate with the Lukashenka government and convince him to engage in 'inclusive national dialogue' for weeks after the outbreak of mass violence on 9 August. EU sanctions were adopted late due to Cyprus' bargaining, and the first three packets targeted only Belarusian officials and businesspeople. Lukashenka himself was added to the sanctions list only in the second packet in mid-November 2020, when the protest movement had been crushed all but completely (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021; Leukavets 2022).

In June 2021, EU–Belarus relations worsened still further. On 23 May, Ryanair flight number 4978 en route from one EU country to another was forced to land in Minsk. Upon entering Belarusian airspace, the captain of the plane was informed about a possible bomb on board and escorted by Belarusian fighter jets to land at Minsk airport. After landing, Belarusian security officials detained the opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich and his companion Safiya Sapega, who were onboard (Leukavets 2022).

The operation caused outrage in the EU and accelerated negotiations over the fourth package of sanctions. For the first time, the EU introduced sanctions that targeted entire sectors of the economy: oil products and potash salts, Belarus's most important sources of income.

Based on the timeline of events and statements, it was the upcoming introduction of sectoral sanctions—called by the Belarusian leader an element of hybrid war waged by the West against Belarus—that triggered Lukashenka to enact the plan to deliver Europe a repeat of the 2015–2016 'migration crisis'. While EU leaders were meeting in Lisbon to agree on the sanctions three days after the landing of the Ryanair flight, Lukashenka threatened: 'We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves' (quoted in Dettmer 2021). As demonstrated by Greenhill (2010), such threats have been used with varying degrees of success recurrently, also vis-à-vis the EU. As the threats alone were not enough to elicit concessions, Lukashenka moved to the next phase of CEM, going from words to action (Greenhill 2016, 28). In May, the Belarusian state-owned travel agency Tsentrkurort partnered with travel agencies in the Middle East to provide potential migrants with hunting tours in Belarus (Hebel and Reuter 2021). According to the investigative report of independent Belarusian news site Reform.by (2021), in August 2021 a package tour from Iraqi Kurdistan to Belarus cost US$560–950, inclusive of flight tickets, a visa, insurance, hotel accommodation, and a few excursions. At the same time, the number of flights to Minsk increased. Belarus' national carrier, Belavia, had just one weekly flight from Istanbul to Minsk in February–March 2021. By July it had two, while at the beginning of August, Iraqi Airways started flying directly to Minsk from Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah and FlyBaghdad from Baghdad (Euroradio 2021). Tourist visas were issued on-site at Minsk airport. In November 2021, Oksana Tereshchenko (quoted in *Belorusy i rynok* 2021), responsible for the international economic activities of Minsk airport, said that the airport was preparing for new flight connections from cities in Algeria, Ethiopia, Iran, and Morocco.

Investigative reports suggest that Belarusian state officials were directly involved in bringing migrants to the border with Lithuania and Poland. According to the investigation of Lithuanian media outlet LTR (2021), arrivals at Minsk airport were taken first to hotels and, after a few days, to the border, being told that another car would be waiting for them on the other side. Some accounts point to the decisive role of Belarusian border guards, while others suggest that Belarus quickly became a hub for international smugglers, who charged thousands of dollars for assisting a migrant in reaching the European Union (LTR 2021; Reform.by 2021; Hebel and Reuter 2021). In November, Lukashenka admitted in a BBC interview that it was 'absolutely possible' that his forces had helped migrants cross into Poland (Rosenberg 2021). There is an interesting parallel between his comment 'We're Slavs. We have hearts' (Rosenberg 2021) and Türkiye's President Erdogan's remarks about his 'refugee-friendly' policy towards Syrian refugees being rooted in the Islamic tradition, 'generosity and brotherhood' (Jennequin 2020, 2). While Lukashenka's main objective was, arguably, to compel the EU to come to the negotiation table and to level the playing field (Greenhill 2016, 27–28), the utilization of CEM also brought some tangible economic benefits for the government. While some Belarusians did see the appearance of migrants as a business opportunity, Sauer (2021) suggests that others were irritated by them.

Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish politicians and officials used the undeniable evidence of Lukashenka's agency as a justification to frame the crisis as a 'hybrid attack' and thus of their decision to resort to illiberal migration practices on the border: erecting razor-wire fences, reinforcing their border guards to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from entering their territory, pushing back migrants, and refusing to ensure regular asylum process for those who had entered their territories (Margesson, Mix, and Welt 2021). The rhetoric and the policy that followed were accepted by both the majority of the countries' domestic constituencies and EU officials, thus succeeding in what Greenhill (2016, 32) calls 'issue redefinition'. In categorizing these migrants

as victims of Lukashenka's gamble (Natter 2021, 113), authorities across Europe succeeded in demobilizing and marginalizing the pro-migration camp, which in turn prevented the split in society sought by the Belarusian leader (Greenhill 2016, 32). The European Union, too, endorsed the rhetoric of the border crisis as a 'hybrid attack' promoted by the Eastern member states. For example, during her speech on 18 September 2021, Ursula von der Leyen (2021) referred to the border crisis as 'a hybrid attack to destabilize Europe'. Indeed, Poland proved to be well prepared to respond to a CEM with an illiberal arsenal. Pushbacks of migrants who managed to cross into the country and the construction of border fences paralleled the border management strategies of illiberal autocracies such as China (Greenhill 2016, 33).

We argue that the framing of the border crisis as a hybrid attack was a narrative tool that enabled European actors to minimize or outright nullify the hypocrisy costs that its illiberal response in the crisis generated, thus preventing societal polarization that would have pushed them to make concessions to Lukashenka. The Polish authorities did attempt to apply issue redefinition (Greenhill 2016, 32) and frame migrants as 'terrorists' for the domestic constituency in order to ensure that their voters would remain supportive and unified over the illiberal government policy. However, the attempt failed, as even its conservative and government-supportive Catholic Church criticized the border pushbacks. Yet the mobilization of the pro-migration/refugee camp remained marginal because of the dehumanizing hybrid attack narrative combined with the limited amount of information from the border zone, given legislation that restricted media and NGO access to the area. There was no public outcry over the government's utilization of CEM from the side of Belarusian society, arguably because it had been thoroughly repressed in the aftermath of the 2020 protest wave. For example, the Belarusian Red Cross, which supposedly provided some relief and assistance in the border zone, did not criticize the government given its status under the control of the Lukashenka administration.

The Belarusian migration crisis demonstrates that Lukashenka's highly repressive authoritarian state was fully capable of exploiting and manipulating the migration outflows created by others (Greenhill 2016, 25). For the EU, it proved to be near impossible both to compel Lukashenka to put an end to the CEM and to convince the migrants to stay at home. At the same time, outsourcing the issue by dealing with third parties—the migrant-sending countries—seemed to be an effective tool in cutting the route. Although some of the EU's Eastern member states criticized Angela Merkel for offering Lukashenka symbolic recognition by negotiating the resolution of the border crisis with him (Greenhill 2016, 29), the fact that the EU's sectoral sanctions not only stayed in place but were intensified signifies a failure in Lukashenka's application of CEM (on the coding of successes and failures, see Greenhill 2016, 20).

Conclusions

This chapter discusses the nexus of migration and illiberalism from the perspective of Russia and Belarus, two authoritarian states in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. In the analysis, we apply Greenhill's (2010, 2016) notion of coercive engineered migration (CEM), which captures well the ways that migrants and displaced people can be used as non-military instruments of state-level coercion. According to Greenhill, liberal states are ideal targets for CEM due to their supposed adherence to liberal ideals, whereas illiberal states have little to lose when violating the norms of universal human rights by applying CEM. They are already 'viewed with suspicion and contempt by the most powerful members of the international community' (Greenhill, 2016, 29).

We argue that although the 2015–2016 Arctic Route migration from Russia to Finland and the ongoing migration episode at the Belarus–Polish border seem to differ significantly, they are in the end similar. As examples of CEM they make explicit the significance of instrumentalized migration, and the nexus of migration with liberalism and illiberalism. Both cases demonstrate the

potential that migration may have in autocratic and illiberal states for achieving their foreign-political objectives. Russia and Belarus shared a common target—the explicitly liberal European Union and, to some extent, the West in general.

The 'hybrid attack' rhetoric that Finland and Poland applied dehumanized migrants and asylum seekers who appeared at the border. Rather than building on their supposedly liberal values and ideology, both states took a securitization approach in which not only the actions of the illiberal states Russia and Belarus were countered but also international commitments regarding the rights to apply for asylum. Poland especially was criticized for its illiberal responses that limited domestic civil society organizations' access to migrants for humanitarian aid and ability to exercise their democratic right to demonstrate and act against Poland's illiberal—and illegal—border policy. These actions made the hypocrisy of the liberal West explicit, just as was intended by its illiberal authoritarian neighbours.

In 2015–2016, Finland allowed the entry of asylum seekers from Russia until the negotiated political deal with Russia to stop letting third-country nationals to the border. However, public and political pressure forced the government to restrict migration and negotiate a deal with Russia. Public discussion presented asylum seekers as illegal and as passive objects of Russia's hybrid operation. In Lithuania and Poland, authorities went even further to apply systematic pushbacks. The narrow security and border protection narrative ignored the broader global migratory context—the humanitarian aspects of migration and migrants' own actorness. EU member states and the EU itself made illiberal Faustian bargains that generated hypocrisy costs at both the international and national levels. European policymakers and citizens failed to act according to their allegedly liberal values.

Related to the above, it is clear that the success and failure of CEM is not as straightforward as the literature may suggest. Given the opaque characteristics of authoritarian politics, it is not possible to know for certain the ultimate objectives of authoritarian regimes, or the role of security organizations or hidden,

yet very common, international crime and corruption. Whereas Russia seemed to succeed in creating some societal contradictions in Finland during 2015–2016 by opening the border and, as a result, contributing to the ongoing 'migration crisis', Belarus seemed to fail in both destabilizing Poland and bargaining with the EU regarding sanctions. The securitizing approach to migration worked against the Belarusian autocrat: it gave the EU and its member states clear evidence of the hybrid attack that allowed them to justify their own illiberal methods of migration control and border management. Overall, Russia and Belarus succeeded in triggering illiberal sentiments in European societies.

The usefulness of CEM is also demonstrated in the fact that Russia again opened its border for asylum seekers to enter Finland in November 2023, and in how CEM continues at the Belarus–Polish border. And now, Finland is on the way to even more illiberal responses. The Finnish–Russian land border is temporarily closed, there is no possibility to apply for asylum at the border, and once opened and new legislation is approved, pushbacks will become legal and are expected to be used also in Finland. Framing asylum seekers as a threat and the securitization of migration strengthen illiberalism in the seemingly liberal Europe, rather than challenging it.

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CHAPTER 8

Voice after Exit?

Exploring Patterns of Civic Activism among Russian Migrant Communities in Eurasia after 24 February 2022

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Abstract

Can citizens continue to participate in the politics of their home country after migrating to another country? Many examples exist of migrants engaging in their country of origin's political affairs, such as expatriate voting, forming political communities and hometown associations, donating money to political movements and politicians, advocating for migrants' rights, and other

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forms of political participation. However, it remains unclear why migrants are willing to continue exercising their 'voice' after 'exit', and what the main challenges and obstacles are for them to do so while abroad. In this chapter, we analyse the patterns of civic and political engagement among Russian migrants who fled their home country following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Drawing on scholarship in migration studies, we view exit and voice not as mutually exclusive but as mutually reinforcing alternatives. We argue that the way migrants connect with their homeland, and particularly the connections they have with their employers, plays a crucial role in mobilizing and demobilizing them. The incentives provided by employers may force migrants to damp their propensity to engage in political activities. To support our argument, we rely on an original survey conducted in March–April and September 2022, as well as semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Türkiye.

Keywords: migrants, Russia, civic activism, political remittances, employer, exit, transnational voice

Introduction

In the wake of the Russian government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, an estimated 700,000 Russians fled the country (Kamalov, Sergeeva, and Zavadskaya 2022). This mass exodus represents the largest outflow of people from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among these emigrés were leading experts in top-notch industries, including the IT sector, as well as representatives from the non-commercial sector, science, and education. The loss of highly qualified labour resulted in a depletion of human capital and a significant shift in the Russian political landscape. The influx of unexpected migrants also had an impact on the states and societies of the destination countries, primarily Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye, which accepted the majority of new migrants.

Russia has experienced several waves of emigration since the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 (Obolensky-Ossinsky 1931). During the Soviet period, emigration was severely constrained, although certain groups, such as Jewish migrants, could leave the country (Remennick 2015). In the 1990s, former citizens of the USSR sought opportunities in Europe, North America, and Israel, fleeing an economic disaster and extreme poverty (Dieckhoff 2017; Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019). The number of emigrants decreased only during a period of economic prosperity in the early 2000s, but Russians abroad remained disjoined (Kosmarskaya 2013): unlike many diasporas, they never tended to demonstrate unity, especially in the political field, though some of them worked hard to establish opposition media, networks, and NGOs abroad (Sellars 2019; Fomina 2021; Henry and Plantan 2022).

However, with the consolidation of authoritarianism, particularly after the annexation of Crimea, a new wave of political emigration began (Greene and Robertson 2019). Finally, after the dramatic increase in repression and military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of Russians fled the country. Compared with previous migration waves, these emigrés were not primarily economic migrants seeking a better life but rather representatives of the political opposition and those who shared an anti-war stance. Some of these emigrés had not planned to leave the country until they realized that their lives and prospects were under tangible threat (Erdal and Oeppen 2020).

The decision to emigrate represents a political action that can be interpreted as both an active exit and an outright protest, or voice. Throughout history, emigrants have remained involved in the political affairs of their homeland in various ways, including expatriate voting (Escobar, Arana, and McCann 2015), organizing political communities and hometown associations (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002), donating money to political movements and politicians (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009), advocating for migrants' rights (Adamson 2002), and other forms of political participation. However, it is unclear why migrants seek to continue to exercise their political voice even after having severed ties with their

country of origin, despite possible transnational repression and years of unsuccessful resistance at home. Previous studies have identified macro-level and individual-level factors that may facilitate voice after exit, such as the type of political regime in the host country, legal migration constraints, economic development, individual legal status, and time spent in emigration (Ahmadov and Sasse 2016a, 2016b; Hoffmann 2010; Pfaff and Kim 2003). Recent studies by Fomina (2021) and Henry and Plantan (2022) have highlighted various political activities of Russian migrants aimed at influencing Russian domestic politics, such as protests, advocacy groups, and investigative journalism.

We claim that the mode of connection with the homeland plays a critical role in mobilizing and demobilizing migrants, especially connections with employers, which define the incentive structure and may force migrants to damp their propensity to engage in political activities. To support our claim, we rely on evidence from an online survey of Russian migrants conducted from 23 March to 4 April 2022 and from 23 August to 25 September 2022, and 35 in-depth interviews collected in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Armenia among recent migrants. Host countries vary dramatically in terms of political freedom and opportunities for migrant activists to voice their claims. Kazakhstan is a closed authoritarian regime with an oppressed opposition. The Kyrgyzstani regime has deteriorated under Sadyr Japarov's rule and has strengthened its ties with Russia. Georgia and Armenia are examples of competitive political systems but also have a noticeable presence of Russia and its interests (Freedom House 2023). Finally, Türkiye is the only one of these states that is beyond the geopolitical orbit of Moscow, but it still maintains an authoritarian regime with severe constraints on civil society (Freedom House 2023).

In contrast to previous waves of migration, the current wave is highly politicized and has the potential to self-organize and form political and civic networks, which are currently impossible in Russia. This raises the question of whether and to what extent citizens participate in home-country politics after migrating to

another country. Will the new migrants be willing and able to form bottom-up civic associations, or will they prefer to sever ties with their homeland and start a new life from scratch?

In this chapter,[1] we use the revised 'voice, exit, and loyalty' framework proposed by Albert Hirschman (1978, 91) to analyse political participation and abstention among the recent wave of Russian emigrants. We view 'exit' and 'voice' as mutually reinforcing alternatives, rather than mutually exclusive. Emigration significantly reduces the costs of political dissent by reducing state capacity to repress those who leave, thereby making political activity more possible. However, we argue that the nature of connections with Russian society, and specifically with the Russian labour market, affects the transmission of political remittances and civic and political activism. Employers, particularly state-dependent companies, are known to be the main brokers in ensuring citizens' political compliance in the Russian electoral context (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2019). Workplace mobilization has played a critical role in upholding successful electoral outcomes for the incumbent. Insecure and illiberal labour markets make employees more pliant and vulnerable to any requests made by employers. Although the degree of employee dependency varies widely across different sectors of the economy, skill mobility and transferability also render employees less dependent. Those who remain employed with Russian companies that are registered in Russia are more compliant and are therefore likely to be more cautious and less likely to exercise transnational voice. Likewise, those who are employed with companies registered in host countries are likely to be more cautious and compliant with the pressure and expectations from their employers and the receiving society given their migrant status. The type of pressure stems from the nature of political regimes and labour markets in receiving societies.

We begin by presenting our theoretical expectations and examining the recent wave of Russian emigration in a comparative context. Subsequently, we provide a detailed account of the data and methodology, followed by an empirical analysis. The empirical analysis focuses first on the role of repression and political

illiberalism as the primary drivers of this migration wave. We then explore the impact of connections with the homeland, including both affective and labour relations. Lastly, we examine self-reported patterns of activism and political behaviour in receiving countries. The study concludes with a discussion section, including avenues for further research.

Russia's Political Emigration, Political Remittances, and Transnational Voice

The type of political regime in Russia is often characterized as politically and economically illiberal (Laruelle 2019; Åslund 2019). Russian illiberalism is characterized by a rejection of Western models of democracy and human rights, as well as an emphasis on Russian exceptionalism and the need for a strong, centralized state. This form of politics has been particularly prominent under Vladimir Putin's leadership, as he has sought to cultivate a sense of national pride and to position Russia as a counterweight to the West (Laruelle 2019). The recent anti-war emigration from Russia can be seen as a response to the Putin regime's war atrocities in Ukraine. Many Russians who oppose these actions view them as a betrayal of Russia's historical role and their own expectations. Pressure from the state, as well as growing ideological schisms, have made the lives of large groups of urban, educated Russians incompatible with the existing regime.

Unbearable Costs of Repression

The costs of political resistance are anticipated to stifle people's voice and render collective action unfeasible. Repression serves to suppress dissent by imposing high costs on those who would potentially want to engage in collective action to attain a shared goal (Lyall 2009; Opp and Roehl 1990). Furthermore, repression undermines trust between dissenters, thereby further increasing the costs of collective action (Opp and Roehl 1990). Repression mutes not only the dissenters but also the conformists

(Kuran 1995). The adverse effect of repression on voice is even more pronounced when repression targets opposition coordinating centres. Such repression directly affects the number of overt protests and the visibility of political activism. Initially, repression changes the cost structure for the opposition. If repression is directed personally at opposition leaders, they become less willing to self-organize. Second, such repression depletes opposition resources, which become increasingly difficult to replenish. Third, it leads to a decrease in the trustworthiness of opposition leaders, as they become more suspicious of betrayal and surveillance, leading to more problems with collective action (Sullivan 2016). Illiberal authoritarian regimes invest a great deal of effort in discouraging citizens from expressing their grievances and supporting the opposition. Therefore, socializing under authoritarianism involves a significant amount of depoliticization (Howard 2003; Magun and Erpyleva 2015), risk aversion, and compliance (Greene and Robertson 2019).

The Russian political regime has evolved into a full-blown oppressive dictatorship. The failure of the For Fair Elections movement in 2011–2012 was a turning point, leading to the absence of competitive elections, restrictions on peaceful demonstrations and pickets, and even limitations on posting and sharing politically charged information on social media. According to a recent report, more than 15,000 Russians were detained in 147 cities across Russia for taking part in anti-war protests as of March 2022 (Hoffman 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the country's downward spiral into a consolidated and isolated autocracy (Freedom House 2023).

In July 2020, a constitutional vote further cemented the country's autocratic turn, extending the presidential term, dismantling the remaining vestiges of local autonomy, and proclaiming the protection of 'traditional values' (Smyth and Sokhey 2020). The number and scale of protests have declined since the state's crackdown on the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), the main coordinating infrastructure supporting Aleksei Navalny, in 2021. Navalny, who was suspectedly murdered in a Russian prison in

February 2024, had been imprisoned ever since. As a result, many Russian oppositionists have been forced into smaller-scale and less visible forms of political resistance, and for many, emigration has become the only viable option.

Hirschman's concept of 'exit' as a form of political dissent suggests that emigration can serve as a signal of citizens' discontent under extremely repressive conditions, when active protest is associated with unbearable costs (Hirschman 1978). The weakness of Hirschman's idea is that voice, exit, and loyalty are not always mutually exclusive (Pfaff and Kim 2003). Emigration or exit can also undermine the capacity for protest and dissent by destroying domestic networks of political activists that are crucial for the opposition in repressive regimes (Pfaff and Kim 2003). However, under certain circumstances, exit can enhance active protest when grievances arise. Therefore, an increase in associated grievances can raise the potential benefits of voice (Miller and Peters 2014; Pfaff and Kim 2003).

Exit from a country can send a powerful signal to the rest of the society that something is fundamentally wrong to the point that people feel compelled to flee. The large-scale outflow of citizens discredits the regime and undermines the perceived competence of the leader by informing citizens of the incumbent's weak economic and political performance (Miller and Peters 2014; Mueller 1999). The negative signals emanating from such exit may trigger an information cascade, revealing widespread discontent with the regime that was previously unknown. This cascade effect may lead to an increase in protests due to the so-called 'bandwagon effect' (Henry and Plantan 2022). However, in informational autocracies such as Russia, the bandwagon effect may be mitigated by state-controlled media that transmit a positive image of competent leadership (Guriev and Treisman 2020) and engage in the blame game, attributing economic downturns to external actors such as 'the mythical West' or 'the fifth column' (Frye 2019; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020). Under these conditions, the signalling effect of exit is limited, as the state effectively controls the flow of information and coordinates the activity of the opposition

(Pfaff and Kim 2003). Nonetheless, an unusually large number of emigrants heading to democratic states potentially increases the likelihood of peaceful protest and democratization at home, as those who leave for political reasons may continue to express their views even after exit (Kapur 2014; Miller and Peters 2014). Thus, exit may have heterogeneous effects on the prospects for political change in autocratic states.

Transnational Voice and Political Remittances

The impact of outward migration on democratic prospects in the home country can be both positive and negative, depending on a range of factors such as the characteristics of the emigrants, the destination country, and whether the emigrants maintain strong ties and a sense of belonging to their country of origin (Lodigiani 2016). Collective remittance projects, where migrants pool their resources to invest in community development in their country of origin, have the potential to enhance collaboration and partnership between migrants and their home country's government, thereby potentially contributing to economic and social development (Burgess 2012). However, democratization from abroad is possible only if the host country enables immigrants to integrate and participate in social and economic activities, allowing them to acquire new values and norms that can be transmitted to the home country (Lodigiani 2016; Ahmadov and Sasse 2016a). Empirical studies demonstrate that greater levels of emigration can reduce domestic political violence by providing exit opportunities for aggrieved citizens and generating economic benefits for those who remain, resulting in more peaceful societies. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that larger flows of emigrants to democracies can spur non-violent protests within autocracies, as exposure to freer countries can spread democratic norms and the tools of peaceful opposition (Peters and Miller 2022).

Maintaining connections between migrants and those who stay in a country plays a crucial role in information exchange and undermining authoritarian regimes. Economic remittances are

a well-known practice of migrants, serving as means to stay in touch with their close social circle, cultivate a sense of belonging to their home country, and even intentionally attempting to influence home-country politics (O'Mahony 2013). The money that migrants send home is thought to be linked not only to improvements in the quality of life in their home country but also to political changes there, although the empirical results are mixed and the exact effect on democratization remains unknown (Ahmed 2012; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2015). Not only do migrants passively send money that their relatives and friends then use to fund political opposition, but they may strategically send money home hoping to engage in the major domestic political matters (O'Mahony 2013). Apart from economic remittances, the most conventional form of migrants' attempts to cultivate ties with their home country, there are non-economic remittances, i.e. the transfer of social, political, and cultural norms. Migrants export ideas and behaviours back to their sending communities (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Barsbai et al. 2017). Such remittances 'can influence political behaviour, mobilization, organization and narratives of belonging in places of destination and origin' (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020).

We argue that political migrants have the potential to facilitate democratization in their communities of origin, especially in cases where they maintain connections with opposition movements in their home country (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). This is particularly true when the country to which the migrants have moved is politically liberal. Various mechanisms underpin this proposed effect. First, migrants acquire knowledge and practices of democracy in their host countries and then transfer these to their home communities (Careja and Emmenegger 2012). Second, financial remittances weaken citizens' dependence on clientelist ties, making voters less reliant on state transfers and their votes harder for the autocratic incumbent to buy (Stokes 2005).

However, the extent of political engagement of migrants with their home country's political affairs is contingent on the amount of time they have spent in their host country and the composition

of their migrant networks (Waldinger 2016). The longer a migrant stays in their host country, the less attached they become to the political process in their home country. Networks dominated by compatriots tend to preserve migrants' initial political attitudes, while more diverse and international networks expand their types of political engagement with homeland affairs.

Migrants residing in foreign countries have the potential to influence the policies of their host country (Heindl 2013). Similarly, they may play a role in bringing about democratization in their home country through remittances (Ahmadov and Sasse 2016a). Russian migrants are not an exception to this trend and are politically active in their home country, according to Fomina (2021) and Henry and Plantan (2022). These migrants engage in activities such as fighting corruption, promoting fair elections, and advocating for human rights, environmental protection, and anti-war causes. Additionally, Henry and Plantan (2022) find that Russian migrants establish connections with host-country politicians, which increases their ability to influence home-country politics. Although the current wave of Russian migrants is much larger and more diverse than previous waves, the behaviour of the migrants seems to follow the same trend.

Russian migrants have settled in host countries the political regimes of which vary drastically, ranging from closed autocracies such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to more liberal regimes such as Georgia and Armenia, where activism and protest constitute legitimate parts of domestic politics. Therefore, we expect more vibrant and efficient communities in more politically liberal regimes such as Georgia and Armenia.

Staying Connected through Labour Markets and Families

The legacy of the Soviet-era planned economy has been one of the key drivers of economic illiberalism in post-USSR states. The planned economy left behind a strong state apparatus and a culture of state intervention in economic affairs, which has hindered the transition to a more market-based economy in many former

Soviet states. Instead, a hybrid model combining elements of state control with market-oriented reforms has emerged (Åslund 2019). Economic illiberalism in post-Soviet states refers to a range of economic policies and practices that deviate from the norms of liberal market economies. These policies may include state intervention in the economy, restrictions on foreign investment and trade, and a lack of transparency and accountability in economic decision-making.

In the context of authoritarian regimes, economic illiberalism has created a peculiar situation for employers, particularly those affiliated with the public sector, who serve as brokers in upholding political loyalty. Workplace coercion and mobilization are widespread practices among large companies in Russia, which mobilize voters and deliver votes in exchange for material benefits or simply to avoid punishment (Frye, Reuter, and Szakoni 2019). This has resulted in a blurring of the lines between the private and public sectors, with employers becoming enmeshed in the state's efforts to maintain its hold on power.

The level of dependence of migrants on their employers varies significantly across different economic sectors, skill levels, and geographic locations. Individuals with more transferable skills, entrepreneurs, and the self-employed may enjoy greater flexibility, while those with non-transferable skills or public sector employees (such as schoolteachers, as noted by Forrat 2018) may have fewer prospects abroad and stronger ties to their employers. Large numbers of migrants maintain their employment with Russia-based companies through remote work arrangements or fee payments. While remote work allows migrants to stay financially afloat and ensures their income in the short term, the Russian government seeks to incentivize remote workers to return by increasing tax rates (as reported in Reuters 2022) or to leave the Russian labour market altogether. The nature of this connection with the country of origin may have ambiguous effects on migrants' propensity to engage in political action abroad and exercise transnational voting rights. These mechanisms may involve direct pressure, as well as self-restraint on the part of migrants who devise plans for their

eventual return to Russia. We hypothesize that the presence of an employment relationship, in addition to family ties, shapes the incentives structure for Russian migrants.

Data and Method

This analysis is based on an original survey of individuals who left Russia after 24 February 2022. The survey was conducted in two waves, the first from 23 March to 4 April 2022 and the second from 23 August to 25 September 2022. This was a panel survey, meaning that we resurveyed the same respondents in the second wave. Thus, our sample includes only those who left Russia between the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the announcement of 'the partial military mobilization' in Russia. The questionnaire included series of questions on socio-demographic status, professional positions, the political views of the respondents, their plans after departure, threats in case of return to Russia, and needs and fears in the destination countries. As we do not have access to population data for Russian migrants, a convenience sample of 1,680 respondents was recruited via online relocation groups, Telegram channels, and networks close to the OK Russians project, a non-profit organization that provided assistance to anti-war migrants in spring and summer 2022. The questionnaire was distributed through relocation groups (at least ten groups on relocation in 60 countries), through internet influencers, and by respondents themselves. It should be noted that the data obtained does not represent the entire population of Russians who have left, but it provides an understanding of the portion that is most active on social media and messaging platforms. Therefore, the sample may be biased towards the youngest, most active (including politically) internet users, city dwellers, and professionals. It is also important to highlight that our survey does not cover draft evaders, who constitute another wave of predominantly male migrants from Russia who fled due to 'the partial military mobilization'.

We conducted a series of in-depth interviews with recent migrants, consisting of 14 interviews in Tbilisi, Georgia, during the summer of 2022 and five interviews in late March and April 2023; four interviews in Kazakhstan; six interviews in Armenia; five interviews in Türkiye; and one in Kyrgyzstan—making a total of 35 interviews, with Georgia being over-represented in the sample. Informants were recruited through the initial online survey as well as snowball sampling. Georgia emerged as one of the most popular destinations for Russian migrants due to its visa-free entry policy, allowing them to stay for a year without registration. Tbilisi became a hub for hundreds of Russians who immediately launched a series of anti-war initiatives, humanitarian aid, charity activities, and political protests.

Away from Illiberalism and Repression

The relative costs of voice and exit are crucial for making sense of the recent emigration (Dowding et al. 2000). Exit is not a cost-free option, as leaving a permanent place of residence requires financial resources and social capital. Back in Russia, many of the migrants had been professionals with well-established careers in high-paying fields and had lived comfortable upper-middle-class lives. According to several accounts, the current migration wave consists mostly of middle class, highly educated people with large networks and more liberal political views (Kamalov et al. 2022). In other words, they are not representative of the Russian population and reflect the worldview of groups of highly educated, urbanized, and highly politicized citizens. What prompted people who were relatively safe to flee Russia in a rush, leaving their comfortable lives behind?

Our survey suggests that the average respondent was 32 years old, while the average age of the Russian population as a whole is 46 years. Most migrants came from Moscow, St Petersburg, and other cities with more than a million residents. Most respondents had higher education or a postgraduate degree (81 per cent), against 27 per cent in the general population.[2] Prior to the war, 15 per

cent could afford luxury goods (against 1 per cent in Russia), 27 per cent could purchase a car (against 4.4 per cent in Russia), and 46 per cent could purchase expensive home appliances (against 26 per cent in Russia). For many respondents, leaving Russia meant abandoning projects and possessions dear to their hearts and wallets: informants mentioned that they had left recently purchased apartments and newly acquired professional positions. One of the informants in Tbilisi explained that:

> I lived in Moscow all my life, I really liked Moscow. Not so long ago I moved into my own apartment, settled in, just a year ago … the last job I had in Russia, I had to quit in June because I couldn't continue working remotely. I basically liked the job, I got promoted there at the beginning of February. I mean, everything was kind of good. (Kirill, 25, project manager, Georgia)

Many of the migrants considered themselves patriotic and rooted for Russia's economic success. Leaving Russia threw them into a dilemma about their sense of belonging to their country. Exit from the country meant abandoning their goals of making a contribution to the lives of their communities and the state. They were presented with the question of whether they should continue to look for meaningful ways of cultivating their Russian identity or reconsider their identity choices altogether.

> I was always raised with the attitude that Russia is our home country, no matter what happens here, we will fight for it. This attitude is very strong. Now I have a kind of feeling of losing my identity, because … I tied my activities to 'making Russia better', 'doing business to create jobs', 'making design to raise visual culture', 'participating in contests to represent Russia'. Now it's kind of not quite clear what to do with that. Apparently, I will have to somehow reformat my views for some other country. (Alevtina, 26, designer, Georgia)

While the majority of migrants interviewed possess skills that are easily transferable in the global market, the occupation of a large portion of Russian migrants—especially those employed

in the realms of journalism, culture, and the non-governmental sector—remains anchored in the Russian cultural context. The latter makes their employment prospects in their new countries less cheerful. Among those respondents who had been employed, 45 per cent were from the IT industry, 16 per cent from art and culture, 16 per cent from management, 14 per cent from science and education, and just 8 per cent from journalism. Remarkably, only 10 per cent received assistance from their employers when relocating.

For many families, the proliferation of pro-war propaganda in schools and kindergartens became the last straw. The war was largely perceived as an emergency and most people who had left Russia in February and March 2022 either did not plan it beforehand or considered emigration as a remote and unlikely prospect. Elena, a mother of two children, talked about her teenage son and his rough experience at his school in Russia after the beginning of the full-scale invasion due to his anti-war stance:

> Well, he kind of supported us, I mean he's kind of like he's more on our [side]. I mean about the war and all that. Well, the war is kind of bad, everything is terrible. But it turned out that his friends were on the other side … After a while it turned out they had a conflict, they said that he was a traitor, f****t—well, he has long hair … So, he stopped [going to school]. So, I said, okay, don't go … It was essentially bullying. (Elena, age unknown, housewife, Türkiye)

Push factors include the lack of freedoms, especially freedom of speech and assembly, and the de facto ban on certain professions (e.g., journalism) and on activism. The risks of political repression due to an anti-war stance became extremely high. This is how one of the ACF activists, Aleksandr, tells the story of his evacuation:

> Well, we have connections through … the Anti-Corruption Foundation, that is, Aleksei Navalny's structure, and they recommended that we leave immediately. Because at that time the persecution of all former employees of Aleksei Navalny's own

> structure began, and we were recommended to seek help from a foundation called [he names an international organization that supports civil society in Russia] … We turned to them, and they helped us with the logistics of the whole thing, because at the time tickets were very expensive. And they helped us with tickets and shelter for the first couple of days. (Aleksandr, 35, male, journalist/activist, Georgia)

Aleksandr had had to leave his mother, who was not well, in Russia. He had attempted to visit her a while ago: he crossed the border with Georgia in Verkhnii Lars, but his flight was cancelled due to weather conditions and he had to stay in Vladikavkaz. Before he was able to get to his mother, police came to his place to search it. Aleksandr had to immediately return to Tbilisi. Another civic activist Natalia recalls:

> From the first days of the war, we revamped our Telegram channel … into a news aggregator … all the news about what was happening at the battlefronts, and [we] actively opposed the war. Right away we took an anti-war stance. So, we made the decision that we should leave when the law on 'fake news' was passed, when we realized that we were facing 15 years [in prison] for our work. It was probably somewhere around March 1st when we realized that we should leave, we were told that yes, here we are. (Natalia, around 30, journalist/activist, Georgia)

Survey data suggests that many respondents experienced political pressure before their departure. The predominant form was psychological pressure—preventative talks, warnings, or contact by the authorities. Less frequently, oppositionists had faced straightforward threats from pro-government activists, police detainment, and home searches (see Figure 8.1).

Seventy per cent of respondents believed that upon their return to Russia, they would suffer a drastic decline in quality of life, and 30 per cent that they would risk losing their work or right to study. In addition, half of the respondents expected prosecutions for posting and sharing information about the war in

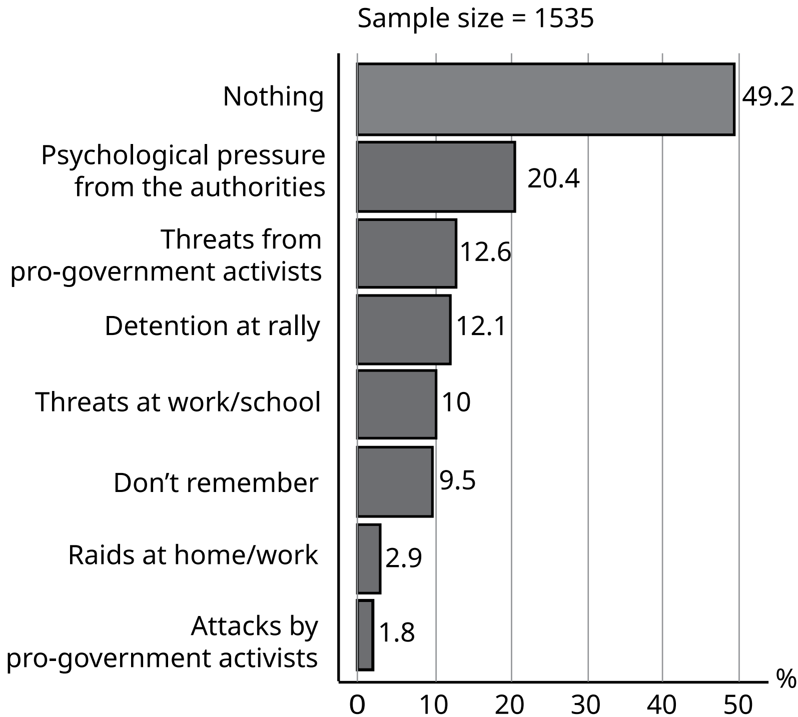

Figure 8.1: Political pressure in Russia

Ukraine on social networks, 20 per cent feared conscription, 19 per cent that they would lose access to necessary medication, and 9 per cent expected criminal charges. Finally, 20 per cent did not know what could happen if they returned. These numbers suggest that repression prevented these citizens from voicing their claims safely, set the risks extremely high, and crowded these people out. This is how Valentina and Petr explained their decision to leave in February:

> That's why the choice was, in general, pretty obvious, that if I want to say what I want to say and do what I want to do, I have to leave—in terms of both physical and psychological safety. (Valentina, 30, NGO coordinator, Georgia)

> I wouldn't have come out [to protest] in Russia if I had been in Russia, because that would have been suicide, and here we went because here, first of all, it was possible, and secondly, because we had to express our position somehow, that's all. (Petr, 35, IT product manager, Georgia)

Staying Connected with Russia: Family and Employers

Employment is one of the strongest ties that migrants have with their sending country; their income and life plans revolve around it, as well as incentives to engage in activism and remit money and 'values' back to Russia. On one hand, employment in Russia may impede exiles from participating in protest initiatives due to fears of potential contract disruptions. On the other hand, it establishes a powerful connection with the homeland and can potentially facilitate political remittances, as migrants still have stakes back home and tend to be more concerned about Russia's domestic developments than with those who have severed all ties, including employment.

The share of those employed with Russian companies tends to decline over time. In autumn 2022, the share of those employed in Russia remotely decreased by almost two-thirds (see Figure 8.2). Within six months, the labour situation of the emigrants had changed. Many kept their jobs in Russia during the first months of their stay abroad, shifting to remote forms of employment. In autumn, we observed transitions from Russian companies to international and local companies, freelancing, or attempts to start a business. Only 2 per cent had become unemployed, and 5 per cent of respondents had started to study. Overall, the economic connection to Russia was gradually weakening. Those employed in international companies and self-employed freelancers, with few exceptions, appeared to be the most economically stable group of migrants. Russian employers' reluctance to retain employees in 'remote work' contributed to the outflow of employees from

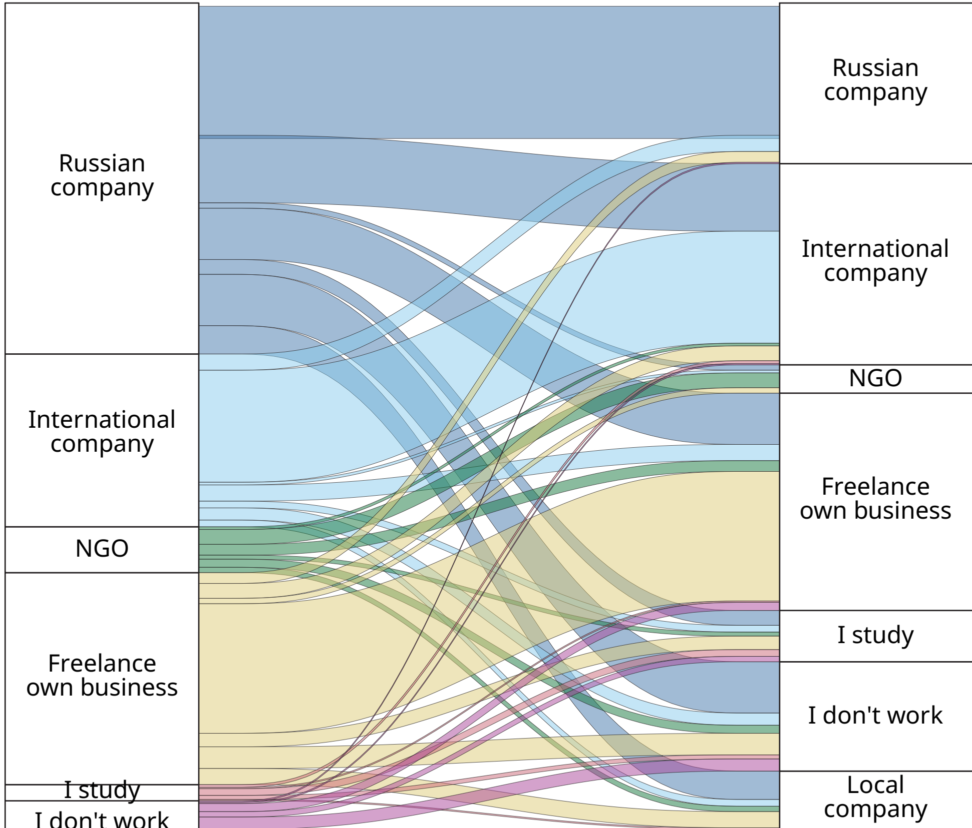

Figure 8.2: Outflow of employees from Russian companies from March to September 2022

Russian companies, reinforced by the tightening of tax legislation on non-residents. Difficulties with money transfers from Russia also played a role in detachment from the Russian labour market.

Among the reasons why respondents abandoned their current workplace were an expected economic downturn and subsequent devaluation of the ruble, unwillingness to pay taxes in Russia and thereby to sponsor the war, and finally, expected redundancy or a planned change of workplace.

> I don't want to pay taxes from my pay cheque into the military coffers of a government and president I didn't elect. (Feedback on the question 'Why have you decided to leave your job', first-wave panel, March 2022)

> Under these conditions, we have lost foreign partners, and I no longer want to pay the taxes that are given to the wars. (Feedback on the question 'Why have you decided to leave your job', first-wave panel, March 2022)

Some of these people left precisely because staying in Russia meant losing their jobs and any career prospects (30 per cent of respondents), while some could have benefited financially had they stayed in Russia. This became possible because the exodus of international companies meant a large import-substitution campaign that opened opportunities to some domestic businesses. Economic reasons also mattered, as many foreign companies left Russia immediately after the war started and their employees had to decide quickly whether to stay in Russia jobless or to move away. Paired with the escalating economic crisis in Russia, this formed a strong push factor for thousands, especially those employed in the IT sector.

> I still get calls there offering me a job. And you understand that they offer me a job there … [at several] times more money than I could ever get here. But as long as it's in this format, it's not acceptable at all. (Evgenia, 40, top manager, Georgia)

> [One option was] to go to a European university [in St Petersburg] for a master's degree. But now it has become clear that things will only get worse and worse, these universities will also have more repression applied to them, etc. I mean, what's the point of this? There are no career prospects either. That's also the reason why it's accelerated [migration]. (Aleksandra, 30, urbanist, Georgia)

According to the survey data, half of the respondents maintained economic ties with Russia and even planned to continue working for their current organizations, while another half did not have

such an opportunity or did not wish to use it. While many had plans to quit working at a Russian company, for some respondents this was not desirable and they preferred to stay attached to a Russian workplace.

> I contacted the supervisor immediately when I decided to leave. He said: 'Yes, you can leave'. We agreed that I would go away for a month, and he would see how I could work remotely completely … And in the end, a month went by, and he said that everything was fine, and I could continue to work like that. (Vladimir, 30, marketing specialist, Georgia)

> I luckily didn't quit [the job in Russia]. In fact, I continue to work with the brand and Instagram that I worked with before. I mean, I continue to cooperate with them in principle, we've changed in the sense that, at some point, I was really caught up in a quite powerful depression … I just didn't have the energy to work on the same scale as I did there, for example, before the war. Because of that, my income went down, and that's quite a lot, but now I'm trying to get back to that level. (Anastasia, 28, beauty blogger, Armenia)

Before emigration, Maxim was happy with his work at the Russian TV Company, although he felt that he had got stuck there. It paid well, and he already planned to have children with his wife. When the full-scale war started, he took an official holiday and left Russia. He and his pregnant wife had to change countries four times before they landed in Türkiye. Since at the beginning it was unclear how long the war would last, many migrants took unpaid holidays. In his interview in a small Turkish town, Maxim recalls:

> [A]t the end of the month of this vacation, I realized that I have no idea how I could go back to Russia, even though I was promised [an exemption from the draft]. Then they [his employer] just started talking about the draft exemption, all sorts of stuff and said, of course you're kind of key employees, key industry, that without television, our country is kind of like it does not work. (Maxim, around 30, event manager, Türkiye)

Almost all informants who kept their Russian employment, with the one exception of Konstantin in Kyrgyzstan who was well versed in Russian and Kyrgyzstani politics, preferred to stay away from politics both in and outside of Russia. Denis, a logistics manager and IT specialist who had arrived in Armenia, said that he had tried to quit his job in Russia but had failed to find a suitable one and had had to return to another Russia-based company. Answering the question about activism, he mostly described Ukrainian diaspora organizations in Yerevan without elaborating on Russian rallies and charities (Denis, logistics manager, Armenia). Maxim, who ended up in Türkiye with his wife, a former TV worker, considered political discussions at work (before the war and when he was working remotely) as a form of activism and sounded proud of this, as he was clearly working in a more pro-government and therefore less friendly environment (Maxim, event manager, Türkiye). Anatoly, then based in Kazakhstan, kept his company operating in Russia and claimed that he had always strived to side with 'a constructive position' (*sozidatel'naya* in Russian) vis-à-vis political activism and had preferred 'small deeds' and urban projects to politics (Anatoly, architect, Kazakhstan). While most of the informants had quit their Russian jobs, whose who had kept theirs one way or another seem to be more cautious. We clearly observed some 'straw-in-the-wind' evidence that confirmed this expectation.

We surveyed the recent migrants from Russia as to whether they planned to maintain ties with their homeland and whether they felt that they had anything left back home. In the Russian-language segment of the social networks, one may observe heated debates over who are the true patriots or the true opposition, schisms between 'remainers' and 'exiters'. Such disputes over whose moral choices are better under the horrible circumstances of the war tend to impede coordination and cooperation between those who stayed and those who left. From the pragmatic viewpoint, those who are outside Russia can openly disseminate information and aid, form civic associations, and build working relationships with the leadership of their host countries. Those who stayed, in

turn, do not lose touch with the reality inside the country and continue to resist. In this sense, maintaining ties between those who stay and those who leave is an important condition for the formation of an alternative political programme for Russia.

> I certainly consider as heroes those people who stayed in Russia, who are doing something now. I know them by name, I follow them, I see what they are doing. And it's probably not hopeless, someone had to stay there and continue at least some kind of civic activity. (Valentina, 30, NGO coordinator, Georgia)

> Well, you have to help [those in Russia], and I don't have the opinion that if you stayed there, you're an asshole. On the contrary, I have a lot of respect for these people who stayed … [like my] wife's sister and her husband. Basically, they worked with Navalny there too, now they [help] Yulia Galyamina. And Galyamina stays in Russia, the children too, the sister's husband. (Aleksandr, 35, male, PR/journalist/political activist, Georgia)

The immediate social circle of back home of someone who has migrated is likely to be more pro-democratic than those with no one close to them who have gone to another country, so migrants' influence rather reinforces and strengthens their relatives' political views than changes it. However, the latter is also possible. Below are two excerpts from interviews in which informants told us that their relatives either were already on their side politically or had changed their minds later, perhaps influenced by their decision to migrate.

> I had a huge fight with my mom [after the full-scale invasion]. I can only talk to her about flowers and neutral topics because she is supportive [of the war], she thinks that everything is normal. Imagine the situation … I came to Russia, I haven't seen my mom for six months. On February 24, we had a dispute, so I tried several times to convince her, tried to convince my grandmother, my cousin, but it didn't work. They were talking according to the *metodichka* [instructions], as if I was talking to Kiselyov or Solovyov [Russian TV propagandists and news anchors] …

> I arrive in May [2022], our dog dies, we are in an even worse state of mind. Practically the first thing she says to me after formal things like 'hello, goodbye' … is 'Do you know that in Ukraine they do experiments on the sick?' I understand that this is not going to end well, so I got up and left. A few days later I visit her again. (Petr, 35, IT product manager, Georgia)

> But at that time, it was February 26, he [the respondent's father] had an opinion that we don't know the whole truth, it's not clear what's going on, who's to blame, who isn't … And as a result, a few months later, [my parents] recently came to visit me. And in the end, yes, his opinion became more radical: war is awful, Putin is a horrible person, everything became clearer. Well, it became easier, but we still discuss it more superficially, without details. (Vladimir, 30, marketing specialist, Georgia)

According to the survey, more than half (57 per cent) of the respondents talked to their relatives in Russia every day, 37 per cent several times a month, and fewer than 7 per cent less than once a month. Talking to family does not mean discussing sensitive political issues (see Figure 8.3). Nevertheless, 18.4 per cent of respondents constantly discussed politics with their relatives in Russia, 36.5 per cent did it often, 38 per cent rarely, and only 7.3 per cent never. Thus, the communication is likely to be emotional and highly politicized. Very few of our informants had had to cut ties with those relatives who did not share their political position. Family connections keep migrants attached to their country of origin and remain the main channel of transmitting back politically relevant information. Based on the interviews we conducted, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of political discussions or debates about the war. Some claimed that they had ceased to talk about the war altogether, while others continued to discuss it and find ways to convey their viewpoint. From the perspective of political remittances, we can only assert that the contacts remained in place that left the possibility of remitting 'values' or at least providing support to those in Russia.

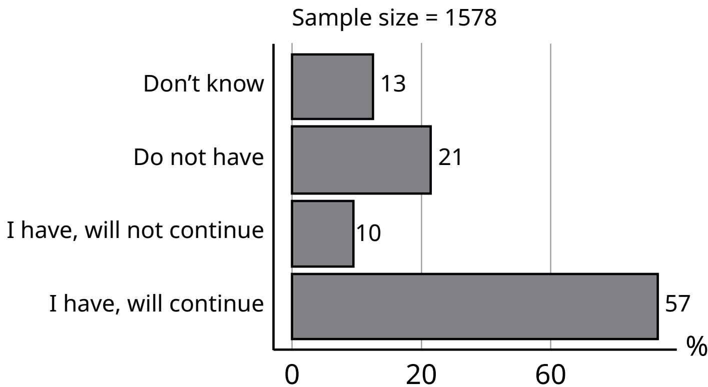

Figure 8.3: Employment in Russia-based companies: first wave of the online survey, March–April 2022.

Transnational Voice

The survey results indicate that the new wave of migrants from Russia is highly politicized and actively engaged in political initiatives, standing in solidarity with each other and maintaining contact with those who stayed in Russia. The vast majority of respondents expressed a deep interest in politics and reported their engagement in political activities (see Figure 8.4). This is in stark contrast to the usual migrants from Russia, who are not as politically active. Moreover, only 1.5 per cent of the new migrants reported having voted for United Russia, while 86.4 per cent followed the recommendations of 'Smart Vote', a strategic voting tool developed by the team of Aleksei Navalny to support opposition candidates who are not allowed to run. The national share of respondents in favour of Smart Vote, according to the Levada Centre, is merely 8 per cent, indicating that these migrants are more politically active and more likely to support the opposition

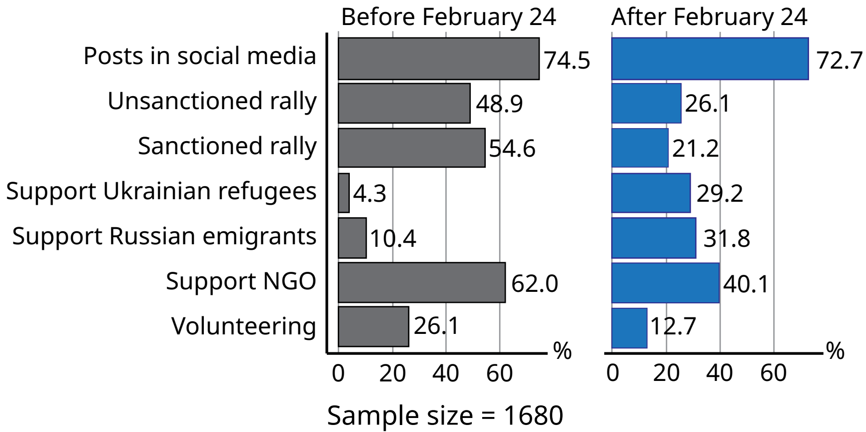

Figure 8.4: Political activism of Russian emigrants before and after emigration

than the general population (Turchenko, Zavadskaya, and Golosov 2022).

The political initiatives of the Russian opposition in exile have been led primarily by the 'old guard', referring to Russian oppositionists who left the country prior to the full-scale invasion. These initiatives are concentrated mainly in the European Union and have yet to fully engage with the communities of new migrants in Eurasia. Among the most controversial of these initiatives is the proposal put forward by the Free Russia Forum during the II Anti-War Conference in May to introduce a passport that would identify 'good Russians'. The rationale behind this proposal is that Russians who oppose Putin's regime and the war in Ukraine are entitled to exemption from international sanctions. This idea sparked intense debates within Russian-speaking intellectual and political circles, as well as within the European policymaking community.

Despite the domination of 'old guard' initiatives, there have been several successful efforts to create bottom-up organizations to represent anti-war Russian migrants and facilitate fundraising. According to the Map of Peace,[3] there are 111 anti-war

communities, with the most visible ones providing aid to Ukrainian refugees. These include Help Ukrainians in Hungary, which provides food supplies; Russians for Ukraine in Poland, which aids individuals at the Polish–Ukrainian border; and Kovcheg, which provides aid to Russian migrants with branches in 29 countries. Similar projects exist in Estonia, the Czech Republic, Armenia, and Georgia. While these organizations focus primarily on providing urgent assistance to those in need and do not articulate any explicit political agenda, it would be incorrect to label them apolitical. Activists within these organizations take a clear stance on the war in Ukraine and do not shy away from engaging in political discourse.

Feminist Anti-War Resistance is among the most successful movements today, with its branched and flexible structure. The movement's representatives have been invited to the congresses of pro-democratic movements in exile and have gained recognition among the opposition. Meanwhile, Navalny's network, the ACF, remains one of the most coherent opposition structures, uniting and coordinating its activists both within and outside of the country.[4] The network is well known for its viral anti-corruption investigations and continued production of online news, political analysis, and even political stand-up shows on YouTube.

One would anticipate that economically successful migrants of the new wave could provide a source of donations to political actors. Our survey indicated that migrants were indeed interested in funding independent political movements in Russia. In fact, 41 per cent of those interviewed had donated money to independent Russian organizations after leaving Russia. However, anti-Russian sanctions have resulted in difficulties with international transfers to Russian accounts, which may significantly limit migrants' ability to send money home. This problem may also hinder migrants' attempts to support opposition politicians and anti-war initiatives that continue to function in Russia, albeit in a limited form due to repression and the final withdrawal of international donors from the Russian NGO scene. Thus, while the vast majority of migrants were active participants in the life of

Russian grassroots initiatives, donating money and volunteering for human rights organizations, financial infrastructure limitations may be the main reason for the weakening of ties with Russian opposition movements.

The Russian state is known for using all of the above-mentioned repression formats. It is highly likely that Russian emigrants are aware about the possibility of repression from the Russian state. Several cases of successful recruitment of influential activists by Russian special agencies have been publicly disclosed recently (Meduza 2022). According to journalist investigations, these activists were recruited to collect and transfer information about activist networks in Tbilisi. Also, many appeals to pass legislation aimed at harming those who have left Russia since the invasion of Ukraine have been made by Russian politicians and public figures. These have been highly populist in their nature, from appeals to increase taxes for remote workers to proposals to confiscate the property of those who have left (RBC 2022). Transnational repression may affect migrants' voice in a detrimental way, making the political activity and protesting potential of even the most active regime opposers much less powerful. However, transnational repression may also increase migrants' mobilization and ability to protest.

> Well, I see actions here, there are Russians all over the place. 'Sakartvelo' does different rallies, something else. But to be honest, I didn't go, I didn't take part in them. For some reason I … in fact when I was leaving, I thought: 'Wow, it is cool, you can do something like that in Tbilisi', but I had a fear that photos might not be super safe, I mean if they take your picture during the campaign. So I had such cautious attitude towards the rallies. (Ekaterina, 31, online education specialist, Georgia)

According to Tsourapas (2021), autocratic transnational repression practices involve not only states but also individuals and organizations. This is relevant to the case of Russian migrants who find themselves in countries that are potential partners in assisting the repressive Russian regime, such as Kazakhstan, Armenia, and

Kyrgyzstan (Tenisheva, 2022). In fact, many Russian emigrants have settled in precisely those countries that maintain cooperation with Russia. Georgia stands out as a prominent exception, as it limits the entry of well-known political activists, fearing retaliation from Russia. In this context, Türkiye is noteworthy as the state least connected to Russia, without any communist or USSR-related legacies. This makes it harder for Russian authorities to pressure the Turkish government to extradite or influence the lives of Russian migrants in tangible ways.

Respondents remained politically active after leaving Russia. More than 70 per cent were active in social networks and signed anti-war petitions, about a half (48.9 per cent) took part in unauthorized actions before the war, and 26 per cent came out to protest even after 24 February. After the war began, 29.2 per cent actively supported Ukrainian refugees and 31.8 per cent actively supported fellow Russian migrants. Before the war 62 per cent of respondents had supported various NGOs, while after 24 February this figure was 40 per cent. Quite predictably, the share of demonstrators went down because in host societies, volunteering and other forms of social activity were easier and looked more desirable. In contrast, rallies usually imply a target audience in the location where they take place, but in the migrants' new societies there was no such audience. Last but not least, several migrants found themselves in countries where rallying was not the most common form of political participation.

As expected, those who had been politically active before leaving Russia continued to engage in various activities in their host societies. Among the countries our informants had settled in, Georgia seemed to be the most vibrant venue, hosting several political initiatives. Aleksandr, for example, described how he and his spouse participated in assisting Ukrainian refugees in Tbilisi:

> When we talk about refugees, we talk about Ukrainian refugees, yes, who are … in the frontline or occupied territories … Yeah. My wife supervises the whole Kharkiv region, she deals with evacuating people from there to Europe … [Answering the

> question about possible repression:] Well, I mean, that's why we left, we could talk and write [freely]. (Aleksandr, 30, journalist and political activist, Georgia)

Another interviewee, Natalia, had previously worked for the ACF and considered it natural to carry on with the same activities, but she abstained from participating in domestic Georgian politics, seeing this as 'unethical':

> Well, as for activism, well, yes, I worked first as a volunteer in Navalny's headquarters [back in Russia, before the full-scale invasion] … I went to rallies organized by the Free Russia Foundation in Georgia, which were rallies for Russians and for Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, that is, for people who had left their countries. But they were rallies against the war in Ukraine. So, I did not go to other actions because it seemed to me like I was meddling in Georgian politics … Well, yes, as if it is unethical to pry into the politics of the country which is objectively more democratic, because I do not have any [right?] Well, I'm not a citizen of Georgia here, and secondly, like we fucked up our own [democracy], we came here, that to restore order here, well as it seems to me, is not very cool. I mean I did not go to rallies that were against the law on foreign agents in Georgia, because again, well, Georgians are doing fine by themselves. (Natalia, around 30, journalist/activist, Georgia)

It seems that migrants who are more politically open tend to choose to settle in states that are also more politically open. As a result, migrants in countries such as Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Kyrgyzstan may be less interested in political activism. This is likely due to the self-selection process that is limited by migration constraints. Olga, a former manager in an international oil company who ended up in Kazakhstan, explained her decision to stay away from activism before and after the full-scale invasion:

> Rather not … I've always had a kind of detached attitude towards [political activism], and it always seemed to me that … it's … maybe not quite right, of course. I could have probably done

> it differently, but it is what it is. Um … it always seemed to me that … not that it's any of my business … I'm out there working and sorting trash and doing what I think is okay, but I've never wanted to get involved in any mass stories at all … I worked on one project … I don't even know if that's cool or not cool. Well, in my mind, it was cool. We were doing a project about cycling in the city, and it seemed cool to me that I was contributing [to the infrastructure] in some way. (Olga, 27, marketing specialist, Kazakhstan)

Another migrant in Kazakhstan, Vadim, who before the full-scale war began had participated in pro-Navalny rallies, argued that political activism after emigration is 'forbidden':

> Well, it's forbidden. As far as I know, by law, so no one participated. I mean, like … Non-residents can't participate in protests. For example, I don't consider this kind of my home and my kind of end point. That's why I don't participate. (Vadim, 33, musician, Kazakhstan)

The incentives structure for migrants in the medium and long run is shaped by the host countries and their political regimes. Those who value activism and a sense of community tend to choose Georgia or move further, to Germany. On the other hand, those who are less politically engaged and do not have prior experience with political activism tend to choose more affordable and convenient locations with fewer language barriers and tend to consider political context to a lesser extent.

Discussion

The political attitudes, skills, level of trust, and economic well-being of new Russian migrants differ significantly from those of the Russian population. Compared with the general population and earlier migration waves, new migrants are more politically engaged. New migrants have demonstrated a capacity for self-organization and mutual aid, creating a variety of public spaces

where different perspectives on Russia and Russian communities meet. The creation of such networks is facilitated by more permissive political opportunities structures. Of the post-Soviet states, Georgia is the most vibrant venue, where Russian migrants have built up communities from scratch despite the largely anti-Russia sentiment. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may appear more friendly towards Russian migrants at first glance, but newcomers quickly learn that their activism is not welcome, leading them to either integrate or move elsewhere. Armenia presents an in-between case and merits further exploration.

From this perspective, migrants in Georgia and possibly Armenia are the most likely to transmit political values and information back to Russia, while political remittances from other non-EU states are limited. The capacity of Russian migrants to influence politics in their country of origin is highly contingent on political dynamics within their countries of destination, international sanctions, and the internal features of anti-war communities. On an individual level, those who were politically active before leaving Russia tend to remain active and to continue to voice their political stance. Professional activists tend to concentrate in Tbilisi. Those who retain their employment in Russia remotely tend to be more cautious about activism and may have been more apolitical before leaving Russia. This group shares an anti-war ethos but tends to use milder language. The fact that these people still decided to leave while maintaining ties with the Russian labour market poses a genuine puzzle and merits further scrutiny.

Migrants' capacity to uphold horizontal networks and take advantage of their social and economic capital is limited by several factors. First, migrants remain dependent on their previous Russian employers, which may impose certain constraints on their activism. Second, while more liberal political environments can outweigh restrictive migration legislation, there is little evidence that communities to those in Georgia or Armenia have emerged in Kazakhstan, Türkiye, or Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, this analysis does not address the challenging identity questions raised by the fact that most migrants end up in former 'colonies' and countries

that send labour migrants to Russia. Lastly, we do not examine the gender aspect of migration and how it shapes patterns of activism in host countries. Rather, we offer a broad overview of Russian migration from the perspective of connections with the homeland, potential for political remittances, and correlates of activism in migrants' new homes.

Notes

1 We express our gratitude to the editors of the volume Dr Anna-Liisa Heusala and Dr Kaarina Aitamurto from the University of Helsinki and Dr Sherzod Eraliev from Lund University , as well as three anonymous reviewers.

2 Hereinafter we rely on socio-demographic data from Levada Centre (2021a, 2021b).

3 Map of Peace website: https://mapofpeace.org.

4 The data used in this chapter was collected before Aleksei Navalny was allegedly killed in prison in Russia on 16 February 2024.

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Informants

Informants were anonymized and assigned random names.

1. Ekaterina, 31 years old, online education specialist, 8.7.2022, Georgia
2. Kirill, 25, project manager, 6.7.2022, Georgia
3. Alevtina, 26, designer, 9.7.2022, Georgia
4. Valentina, 30, NGO coordinator, 12.7.2022, Georgia
5. Petr, 35, IT product manager, 8.7.2022, Georgia
6. Evgenia, 40, top manager, 6.7.2022, Georgia
7. Aleksandra, 30, urbanist, 14.7.2022, Georgia
8. Vladimir, 30, marketing specialist, 12.7.2022, Georgia
9. Nikolay, around 30, journalist, 4.4.2023, Georgia
10. Anna, 27, journalist, 27.3.2023, Georgia
11. Olga, 27, marketing specialist in international company, 29.3.2023, Kazakhstan
12. Vadim, 33, musician, 3.4.2023, Kazakhstan
13. Elena, age unknown, housewife, 4.4.2023, Türkiye
14. Anastasia, 28, makeup and beauty blogger, 31.3.2023, Armenia
15. Maxim, around 30, sports/event manager, 4.4.2023, Türkiye, also lived in Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Georgia
16. Oleg, 45, journalist, 5.4.2023, Georgia
17. Vladimir 24, IT specialist, 5.4.2023, Türkiye and Georgia

18. Timur, around 30, teacher/ freelance/entrepreneur, 9.4.2023, Kazakhstan, also lived in Montenegro
19. Denis, age unknown, logistics manager, IT, 10.4.2023, Armenia
20. Karina, around 36, filmmaker/producer, 12.4.2023, Georgia
21. Albina, around 38, entrepreneur, 31.3.2023, Türkiye
22. Marina, age unknown, marketing specialist, 2.4.2023, Armenia
23. Konstantin, 32, university lecturer, 2.4.2023, Armenia
24. Daniil, around 26, PhD student, linguist, 17.4.2023, Kyrgyzstan
25. Mikhail, 27, entrepreneur, 14.4.2023, Türkiye
26. Anatoly, 33, architect-entrepreneur, 12.4.2023, Kazakhstan
27. Olessia, 22, IT specialist and unemployed, 7.4.2023, Armenia
28. Aleksandr, around 35, journalist/political activist, 23.3.2023, Georgia
29. Natalia, around 30, journalist/activist, 28.3.2023, Georgia

CHAPTER 9

Russia's War in Ukraine

The Development of Russian Illiberalism and Migration in Central Asia

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the impact which Russia's war in Ukraine, as the manifestation of illiberal politics in Russia, has had on migration. We outline key developments in Russia's security policy and the shift towards ideological and disruptive illiberalism rooted in Soviet and imperial traditions and examine the war's impact on mobilities within and from Central Asia, specifically looking at what these changing dynamics mean for illiberalism and authoritarian rule in the region. The analysis points to the fact that Russian illiberalism has formed a loose state ideology, resulting in a balancing act between political and economic goals in the Global

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East and Global South and utilizing forced migration and refugees as a hybrid tool to influence the outcome of the war. Ultimately, the way in which migration is addressed in the region is likely to have significant implications for the future of illiberalism.

Keywords: Ukraine war, Russia, illiberalism, migration, security policy, Central Asia, authoritarianism

Introduction

Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to escalate his support for the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine into a full-scale military attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war not only have caused a serious security and humanitarian crisis but also have far-reaching implications for the political, economic, and social dynamics of Eurasia. The war has been seen by some as a way for Putin to assert Russian dominance in the region and rally domestic support for his regime. Regardless of the complex set of motivations behind the war, it has had a dramatic impact on the lives and mobility of people in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as on the broader geopolitical landscape of Europe and Eurasia.

Millions of displaced Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere because of the conflict, causing a significant migration crisis in Europe. This migration crisis has had far-reaching consequences for both the countries hosting refugees and the refugees themselves. Concurrently, the war has changed the migration landscape of Russia, one of the largest migration hubs in the world. The events on the ground in both Ukraine and Russia also show the return of the instrumentalization of migration as a form of warfare.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the impact which the war—as the ultimate manifestation of post-socialist-era illiberal politics in Russia—has had on migration in the region. Based on research literature, government documents, statistics of international organizations, and media reports, we define the key elements in the development of Russian illiberal politics leading up

to its war in Ukraine, the war´s impact in the Russian labour market and on migrant workers from Central Asia, and the instrumentalization of migration during the war.

First, we outline key developments in Russia's security policy which have been impacted by ideological and disruptive (Kauth and King 2020) versions of illiberalism, with important outcomes for governmental policymaking and administrative culture. We highlight the erosion of procedural democratic norms resulting from the overall securitization of Russian policymaking. Both forms of illiberalism propose solutions that are majoritarian, underline sovereignty in questions pertaining to internal matters, and shift attention from politics to culture (e.g. Laruelle 2022).

The second part of the chapter looks at the war's impact on mobilities within and from Central Asia, specifically looking at what these changing dynamics mean for illiberalism and authoritarian rule in the region. Western sanctions imposed on Russia have had a significant impact on its economy, which is the largest employer of Central Asian migrant workers. This, in turn, has caused economic and social pressure in remittance-dependent countries of the region as well as so-called 'reverse migration'—the relocation from Russia to Central Asia of refugees or those escaping conscription. Since the war in Ukraine is ongoing with no clear prospects of perspectives, our analysis focuses on short- and mid-term consequences.

Illiberalism in Russian Security Politics and the War in Ukraine

Before 2014, the Russian Federation was a state with macroeconomic stability and potential for continuing modernization and institutional changes. In 2022 Russia began to wage a full-fledged war against Ukraine, and it competes for a position among the illiberal political regimes of the Global East and the Global South. Discussions about a visa-free regime between Russia and the EU now belong to another era, while Russia's previous technocratic, narrow approach to modernization (Gel'man et al. 2021) has

turned into an ideological struggle with the perceived hegemonic enemy, the United States, and a revision of the previous formally democratic structures of the state.

Illiberalism in Russian security politics, which we claim to be a major reason behind the war in Ukraine, is based on the specificities of both the Soviet and the imperial eras. Both time periods, except for the Great Reforms in the mid-nineteenth century and the *perestroika* period, were dominated by various degrees of nationalistic, imperialist, and authoritarian governance. Nationalism and imperialism in the Soviet period took the form of forced internationalism and colonization of new regions and nations under the auspices of socialist state building. As Heusala (2018) has explained, Russian migration policy is built on the early Soviet experiences of population control, in which 'national security' was an essential component of policy developments. Russia has followed the global trend of securitization of legislation and administrative policies underlying the re-emergence of national security as an important policy framework. Linked to the development of national security is the selection of high-risk policy domains, receiving increasing public resources and gaining political support for organizational and legal changes. Yet, historically, Russian national security can also be seen as a form of 'protectionism' from the outside world and its negative influences, used by past Russian rulers. This underscores the significance of culture in security politics, which has shaped ideological illiberalism (Kauth and King 2020) more generally in Russian politics, a development which can also be seen as a backlash against the experiences of the 1990s transition period.

Miklóssy (2022) has previously stated that disappointment with the accelerated post-socialist transition undermined the liberal argument in the post-socialist states and created room for leadership able to provide simple explanations of complex issues. The liberal order became challenged by what she calls 'new conservatism', which was combined with nationalism to boost its popularity. Miklóssy argues that unlike in the West, this trend is first and foremost a criticism of Western values and the dominance

of the West within globalization. Schwartz (2016) has pointed out that political elites in power are endowed with a wide range of administrative means to secure communication channels and implant the 'official' interpretation of history into the collective consciousness. Miklóssy (2022) argues that this interpretation must be passed on from generation to generation as core codes of identity of the community, as a shared understanding of national traumas, freedom fights, wars, and the moment of achieving independence. Especially important are cultural traumas, which present social pain as a fundamental threat to the sense of who people are, where they come from, and where they want to go. Traumas are apparent in the narratives of national crises; xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-liberal, traditional, family, and religious values; and attitudes towards minorities (Miklóssy 2022, 5). In the case of Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent radical changes present such a national and cultural trauma.

The Soviet legacy in memory politics has persisted over several decades during the post-Soviet period. Illiberalism in post-socialist Russia has been a continuation of historically embedded conceptions of the security of the state and the sovereign's rule. Kangaspuro (2022) illustrates how the officially nurtured interpretation of the Great Patriotic War leans on representations of Stalin as the commander-in-chief. As the memory of the War turned into a founding myth of state identity, people's need to share a glorious narrative of the common past has overshadowed alternative interpretations of the trauma, while at the individual level, perceptions of Stalin can be more complex and highly critical.

An important component in the evolution of post-socialist Russian illiberalism has been what Kauth and King (2020) call opposition to procedural democratic norms, or disruptive illiberalism. The Russian electoral authoritarian regime has relied upon performance-based legitimacy built on political institutions that have emulated elections, political parties, and legislatures, but have performed different functions (e.g. Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012). For this reason, the leadership has been more vulnerable

to political disequilibrium (Gel'man et al. 2021). Gel'man (2016) has pointed out that in Russia, rent seeking has been not just a side effect of corruption and inefficiency but the major goal and substantive purpose of governing Russia, and formal institutions of the state have been arranged to serve the private goals of insiders of the bureaucracy. These developments may be regarded as the result of the purposeful strategies of political and economic actors, who aim to maximize their benefits and consolidate their power and wealth (Gel'man et al. 2021). In such circumstances the elite's political vulnerability provides more incentives for the leadership to make policy changes if they perceive major domestic and international threats to their political survival. (Gelman et al. 2021)

The 1990s presented a moment when demographic crisis, crime and terrorism, and integration into international systems (such as the Council of Europe in 1996) were high on the agenda, aligned with the democratization of the country. This was followed by the accent on economic growth and stability in the early 2000s, which saw major legal and administrative reforms bringing Russia formally closer to European structures and practices. At this time, the Russian government adopted a mixture of reform policies influenced by New Public Management and more traditional statist thinking, based on the idea that a strong state could best provide a necessary social contract with society. A shift towards more traditional national security thinking as the overarching policy-making framework began as early as 2008, followed by attention to long-awaited military and police reforms, spheres of influence in the foreign policy arena, family policy, pension reform, and anti-terrorism and anti-extremism policies. This was a moment when the dissatisfaction with the new borders of Europe and Russia's standing in the new architecture was openly declared. Since 2014, illiberalism in Russian politics has been reinforced through the memory and identity politics linked with the annexation of Crimea, intense securitization of society and political control, and subsequent constitutional changes in 2020, which ultimately paved way to the aggression against Ukraine.

The question of sovereignty and willingness to assimilate new legal thinking has been at the centre of Russian transition since its Constitution of 1993. Russian participation in the Council of Europe system projected a broad willingness to modernize its legal culture. In the past ten years, Russian conceptions of sovereignty have become more prominent in its legal thinking, which has given further legitimation to centralization and the power vertical, and which is one of key elements in the 2021 Security Strategy (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, No. 400 of 2 July 2021). Legislation on foreign agents and the prohibition of homosexual 'propaganda' (Kondakov 2012) presented developments towards this mindset, framed as 'clashes of modernity' in Russia. Preclik (2011) has argued that the Russian state has effectively securitized human rights by using national myths, constructing the image of negative Western-led globalization and of the danger of assimilation and loss of Russian culture. Thus, human rights and other liberal principles are considered less important than social identity. The illiberal political understanding is that rights need to be accepted progressively, respecting the level of development of Russian society, its institutions, and the overall state of the economy, and translated into the Russian context. The 2021 Security Strategy describes this conflict as a situation induced by unfriendly Western countries forcing their way of life on Russian society to destabilize the Russian state. The Russian posture, therefore, is to protect its own way of life and sphere of influence from these adversary influences promoted by liberal forces.

At the heart of the Russia's national security thinking lies the relations of the three branches of government, both formal and informal, which are critical from the rule-of-law perspective. Legal structures and practices serve as a key venue for the mechanisms of illiberal politics and the development of state–society relations. In their assessment of Russian administration, administrative law, and procedure, Heusala and Koroteev (2023, 405) state that in the post-Soviet era

> the Russian Supreme Court has … equipped itself with a developed set of tools to operate the review of the regulations of the federal and regional executive beyond mere violation of law: *contrôle of conventionalité*, review of legal certainty, legitimate aims, factual basis, and most recently, proportionality … But the number of cases and elaborate criteria do not create a system of administrative justice if they are not evenly applied by impartial and independent judges. Assessment of legal certainty and proportionality cannot become effective safeguards against abuse if they are applied in only a handful of cases. The same holds true in the application of international law: it is referred to if it favors the state, but omitted when it favors the individual—by no stretch of the imagination can this approach be called even-handed. When the Court gives unlimited discretion to the executive, it merely effaces itself and returns to the pre-*perestroika* situation: administrative action and regulation free from any review whatsoever.

The 2020 amendments to the Constitution consolidated this situation, being the most dramatic legal change since the acceptance of the 1993 Constitution that paved way for Russian integration into international legal structures in the 1990s. Article 79 in the amended 2020 Constitution states that 'Decisions of interstate bodies adopted on the basis of the provisions of international treaties of the RF which, as they are interpreted, contradict the constitution of the RF, shall not be enforced in the RF'. Included is a clause stating that 'The RF is taking measures to maintain and strengthen international peace and security, ensure the peaceful coexistence of states and peoples, and prevent interference in the internal affairs of the state' (Teague 2020, 308). In addition, the amendments centralized even further the powers of the Russian president at the expense of regional and local governments, and reduced the independence of the courts by making nominations of high court judges depend on the president.

The security strategies form a roadmap for Russian state building, while the Law on Security (2010) describes the roles and responsibilities in implementation of policies. National security is

built on the assessment of threats, the birth of societal risk positions, definitions of vital interests, and policy decisions regarding proper action. The Law on Strategic Planning (Federal Law of the Russian Federation 2014) consolidated the development towards a unified ideational, legal, and administrative system of centralized decision-making led by the president of Russia (Heusala 2018, 431, 441). Russian policy towards global migration has been linked with all of the above-mentioned structures, and especially with economic planning, demographic changes, regional development, and questions concerning 'civilizational' and Russian cultural identity. As in many other countries, migration has been seen to increase the working-age population and answer the demands of the labour market in Russia. An increase in the birth rate has been an essential component of Russia's social policy, as there will be a shrinking pool of working-age people in the next decades.

This internal development, particularly regarding the way that the state apparatus is managed, has promoted shifts in foreign policy and a radicalization of political rhetoric. Against the background described here, the most recent developments in Russia's security thinking have been striking, but not entirely surprising. The 2021 Security Strategy draws a picture of a world where conservative and liberal values are in direct confrontation in the struggle for domination over the future world order. On the Russian side, the elitist authoritarian view sees the Russian world as under attack from the West, the ultimate goals of which are linked to the destruction of Russian unity as a state. The culmination of this perspective was achieved in Vladimir Putin's speech during the ceremony marking the accession of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and Zaporozhe and Kherson regions to Russia, on 30 September 2022, where he stated that the West's goal was to make Russia—a thousand-year-old civilization and power—a colony, forced to accept a liberal, double-standard rules-based system. He continued that Western elites used national sovereignty and international law selectively to advance their own colonial ambitions (President of the Russian Federation 2022).

In the worldview of the Russian political elites, Ukraine symbolizes the lost power of the Soviet era, which was a constitutive time for most of the Russian leadership. Ukraine represents the continuation of Russian imperialistic rule, as well as a state in the USSR, which should never have left the union and the Russian sphere of influence. Western-led globalization, in this perspective, is a destructive force that should be contained in order to preserve authentic national culture and economic sovereignty. At the same time, the Soviet legacy in post-socialist Russian illiberalism is visible in the view, represented by the Russian elite, that the sovereignty of some countries is simply more important and significant, while the sovereignty of others is merely tolerated as a part of the security architecture established by great powers. The logic behind the attack on Ukraine stands on this premise.

From this perspective, Ukraine represents a battleground between two global powers with different world visions. For Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union could be corrected at least partially by permanent Russian occupation of economically intensive areas of eastern Ukraine. This logic has offered an incentive for the Russian government to continue the highly costly war since 2014, even with the immense human suffering, degradation of the environment, and geopolitical tensions in the region. The war has had significant consequences for global politics in many areas, including illiberalism and migration in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The events in Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 had already caused a new wave of forced migration. The military conflict in the east of Ukraine led to the emergence of more than 1.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine and more than a million people leaving the country (Roman et al. 2021). In Russian domestic policies, nationalistic rhetoric regarding the societal effects of migration have influenced risk assessments in economy and national culture. Lassila (2017) has pointed out that after 2014, Ukrainian refugees were portrayed positively in Russian mainstream media, although the Ukrainian state was heavily criticized.

As the study by Virkkunen, Silvan, and Piipponen in this volume (Chapter 7) shows, the instrumentalization of global migration, and particularly war refugees, has also been included in the arsenal of so-called hybrid methods of influence, aimed at putting political pressure on liberal-democratic societies and testing their resilience in times of crises. Thus, one aspect of the crisis for the Russian side is to see the extent of European societies' resilience. Between 24 February 2022 and 14 March 2024, nearly 6.5 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across the globe, the majority of whom (6 million, or 93 per cent) were recorded in Europe. More than 5.5 million refugees from Ukraine applied for asylum, temporary protection, or similar national protection schemes in Europe. The three main countries where people registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes have been Poland (1.6 million), Germany (1.1 million), and Czechia (590,000) (UNCHR 2024). The influx of Ukrainian refugees initially put pressure on host societies in Eastern Europe and the European Union, leading to concerns about the sustainability of long-term provision of social services.

Under the adversary relations between Russia and Western nations, it is reasonable to suspect that the Russian government expected the political support for Ukraine to progressively dissipate in the context of the economic burden caused by both the influx of war refugees and the financial support given to Ukraine, particularly right after the already economically difficult period of the global pandemic. However, the Temporary Protection Directive in the European Union and similar schemes in other countries, coupled with Ukrainian refugees' formal qualifications and diaspora networks, have led to faster integration compared with other refugee groups in OECD countries. In a few European OECD countries (including Poland, the UK, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Estonia), the share of the working-age Ukrainian refugee population in employment had already reached over 40 per cent in 2023 (OECD 2023).

By 2023, the Russian Federation itself had recorded over 2,850,000 Ukrainian refugees in its territory (UNHCR 2023).

Among these displaced people are those who have entered through the so-called 'filtration camps' (Kortava 2022) from eastern parts of Ukraine to Russia, of whom at least a portion have been coerced to accept Russian passports (Kvitka 2023). The alleged deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied Ukrainian territories for 're-education' and possible adoption by Russian families demonstrates the return of 1940s warfare, only now in the era of globalized social media activism, which makes such strategies hard to disguise. The outcome of the alleged unlawful deportation and transfer of population (children) was the issuing of an arrest warrant on 17 March 2023, for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children´s Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, based on Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute, by the Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court (ICC 2023).

Similarly, as Russia's war is causing the biggest refugee flows in Europe since the Second World War, it is also utilizing forced migration to advance illiberal political goals inside of Russian borders. For the Russian government, the war refugees coming from Ukraine to Russia have presented an opportunity to advance propaganda goals among national audiences, most of whom have limited access to alternative media sources. Similarly, for the home audience, the Russian leadership and the main national media consistently undermine the significance of those fleeing political tension and possible conscription in Russia to its neighbouring countries. The 'purification' of Russian society of unwanted and unsuitable people is depicted as an unimportant, mundane, or even to some extent positive effect of the 'special military operation'. Thus, the war in Ukraine has advanced the exploitation of migration and refugees for military, political, and economic purposes. As the Russian Federation has severed ties with the international legal structures erected to protect human rights, the development has presented itself as an important culmination point of illiberal politics in Russia.

Russian Migration Policy and Central Asian Migration since 2022

Since 1991, Russian migration policies have undergone significant transformations, reflecting the country's struggle to define its identity and relationships with former Soviet republics (Abashin 2017). Migration policy in Russia has continued to be an arena where appeals for cultural affinity and societal consensus have coincided with perceived threats of economic and military influence over Russian national interests and global threats such as international terrorism (Heusala 2018). It is an important part of Russia's official security thinking, as reflected in its 2015 and 2021 security strategies.

As Abashin (2017) has analysed, migration policies, initially shaped by the collapse of the USSR, delineated distinctions between refugees and forcibly displaced persons, signalling preferences for former Soviet citizens. Efforts to support compatriots abroad evolved into simplified procedures for acquiring Russian citizenship in the 1990s. However, by the early 2000s, policies had shifted towards categorizing migrants as 'ours' versus 'others' and prioritizing certain ethnicities for citizenship. This trend continued with the narrowing of the 'compatriot' definition in 2012, emphasizing ties to Russian territory and culture. Subsequent reforms aimed to regulate migrant flows, with measures such as deportation and stricter residency requirements. Despite the intention to attract foreign labour and streamline legalization, policies often resulted in confusion and contradiction, reflecting a complex interplay of economic, demographic, and political considerations, sometimes influenced by populist rhetoric. Overall, as Abashin (2017) argues, Russian migration policy has reflected a nuanced balancing act between competing interests, ideologies, and geopolitical realities since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Migration flows between Russia and Central Asia have also connected various foreign policy goals in the Eurasian space. For the Kremlin, 'migration served as one of those trump cards forcing Central Asian governments to accept Moscow's rules' (Eraliev

and Urinboyev 2023, 7). The Eurasian Economic Union has been one of the key foreign and economic policy goals of Putin's presidency. It has consisted of economic integration, and a post-Cold War world idea of Greater Europe and Russia's role in Eurasia (Sakwa 2015, 18–19). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a large-scale shadow economy has been an important component of this integration (Kangaspuro and Heusala 2017). Lane (2015) has pointed out that Eurasia is crucially important for Russia's policy because of globalization. He sees the Eurasian Economic Union as a regional economic formation aimed at constructing the multipolar world order preferred by Russia's foreign policy.

We argue that the relationship between migration and illiberalism can be a mutually reinforcing one. Well before the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, the labour market shared by Russia and its neighbours de facto created an area of economic integration. Russian migration policy has been based on maintaining collaboration with Central Asian leaders whose governments rely on circular migration to alleviate economic development challenges and managing the two sides of the war refugee crisis in a tactically suitable way to sustain political domestic credibility. Migration, particularly the high number of workers leaving their home countries for employment opportunities in other countries, as is the case in Central Asia, can serve as a safety valve for sending-country governments by reducing domestic unemployment and social unrest. Long-standing factors behind the migration to Russia from former Soviet republics include contrasts in quality of life; the contraction of Russia's working-age population; regional conflicts; job creation relative to population growth, attitude to migrants, and prospects for their naturalization; the size of existing diasporas in Russia; and the prospects for the overall stability of the state and its popular perception (Ioffe 2020). In turn, Russia, which has utilized neoliberal economic policies, has been able to use migration effectively as a means of maintaining elite consolidation by creating the conditions for economic growth and the control of mass media discussion about migration, and to restrict the work of NGOs and labour unions. Russian labour

markets have included an important component of ‘semi-legality’, where the economy relies on people whose status is ‘in between’ (e.g. Kubal 2013), forcing the society to balance domestic policies and the demands of international economic and political regimes (Heusala 2018).

While a gradual decline in labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia can be observed in the years following Russia’s invasion of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russia persists as the primary destination. Following the outbreak of full-scale aggression by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, Western countries imposed all-out sanctions on the Russian economy. This prompted many academic and policy experts to predict a mass exodus of migrant workers from Russia, particularly from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which constituted most of the migrant workforce (CABAR 2022). Despite economic and political crises in the past two decades, migration patterns between Russia and Central Asia have remained resilient (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). Nonetheless, the unprecedented nature of the 2022 sanctions led many to believe that labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia might come to an end.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine had various effects on migrants, with some opting not to go to Russia for ethical reasons while many others believed that the war would bring about more economic opportunities (Schenk 2023). During the first weeks after the start of the war, experts predicted that Western sanctions could bring a slowing down of Russia’s economic growth, which could lead to reduced demand for migrant labour. This would have made it more challenging for Central Asian migrants to find employment, as there would be fewer job opportunities. However, labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia proved to be resilient once again. The Russian authorities managed to prevent a total collapse of their economy, employing administrative measures to stabilize the ruble exchange rate, an important factor in Central Asian labour migrants’ decision to stay on in Russia. However, foreign workers who chose to stay in Russia encountered heightened security measures, were unfairly blamed for problems, and were

even directly recruited to join the war (Ozodlik 2023; Najibullah 2023; Putz 2023).

Moreover, Russian citizenship has long been seen as a pathway to a better life for many Central Asian migrants (Schenk 2023). In the past, it was sought-after as it offered migrants the ability to bypass bureaucratic hurdles and avoid harassment by the police. It also provided access to better-paying jobs and improved social services. For example, approximately 145,000 people from Central Asia became Russian citizens in 2020, demonstrating a growing interest among many migrant workers even in the COVID-19 pandemic year (Voices on Central Asia 2021). However, with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent drafting of Russian citizens into military service, the once-desirable status of Russian citizenship has become toxic for many Central Asians who had become 'new Russians'. Many Central Asians who had obtained Russian citizenship found themselves subject to military service in the Russian army, forcing them to participate in the war effort in Ukraine. The Russian government made clear its plans to attract migrants from Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to join its armed forces. This move was part of a larger strategy that was set in motion when, in early 2024, Putin approved a streamlined process for foreign nationals to obtain Russian citizenship after serving one year in the military (TASS 2024). Hundreds, and possibly even thousands, of Central Asians have been reported to be working on the occupied territories of Ukraine. Despite warnings from their respective governments to avoid travelling to Ukraine and the dangerous conditions, these migrants continue to be lured to the war-torn region by promises of high wages from construction firms in Russia and intermediaries (Khashimov 2023).

The conscription of Central Asian migrants who had acquired Russian citizenship has led to a re-evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of obtaining citizenship in Russia, and many have decided to forego the process of obtaining citizenship altogether, choosing instead to remain as temporary workers with limited rights and protections. In response, Russian authorities have

threatened to strip Russian citizenship from naturalized citizens from Central Asia if they refuse to join Russia's war in Ukraine (Najibullah 2023). The only exception concerns citizens from Tajikistan, the poorest country in the region, which has a dual citizenship agreement with the Russian Federation. The number of Tajiks who have obtained Russian citizenship has been constantly on the rise during the 2010s and early 2020s, and is equal to the number of naturalized citizens from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan combined. In 2022, while the number of newly naturalized Kyrgyz and especially Uzbeks in Russia decreased, around 174,000 people with origins in Tajikistan received Russian citizenship—a sharp increase from almost 104,000 in 2021 and 63,000 in 2020 (Eurasianet 2023).

Russia's war against Ukraine has caused a significant shift in the employment patterns of Central Asian migrants, who have traditionally looked to Russia as their primary destination for work. As the war became more protracted, both the governments and the citizens of Central Asia have been forced to explore other job opportunities elsewhere. The desire to seek alternative destinations will likely increase, particularly among migrants from Tajikistan, following the terrorist attacks at Moscow's Crocus City Hall on 22 March 2024, where a group of individuals from Tajikistan were implicated as perpetrators. Subsequently, Russian authorities have initiated a crackdown on Central Asian migrant workers through large-scale raids and the implementation of draconian restrictions. The political instability and economic turmoil that have resulted from the war have made many Central Asian governments more determined to reduce their reliance on Russia as a source of employment for their citizens. Despite its economic challenges, one of the main destinations that has emerged as an alternative to Russia is Türkiye, which shares linguistic and religious ties with many Central Asian countries and maintains a visa-free entrance regime for citizens from these countries (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022).

While the Russian labour market offering jobs to millions of migrants may seem beneficial for Central Asian economies, it

also creates potential challenges for their authoritarian regimes. If many migrant workers return home due to a serious economic crisis in Russia, this could lead to increased unemployment and social unrest, putting regime stability in the region at risk. To mitigate this risk, Central Asian governments will continue to pursue authoritarian modernization policies (Gel'man 2016), aiming to develop their economies while maintaining tight control over society and politics. However, this may come at the expense of civil liberties and democratic values, as governments may tighten their grip on civil society through illiberal practices such as restricting civil liberties and maintaining tight control over the media and civil society and suppressing dissenting voices.

The war in Ukraine has brought up another dynamic to migration patterns in Russia and Central Asia: the exodus from Russia. The majority of those who left during the first six months of the war, except for political dissidents, had the financial means and social connections for a smooth relocation of their families and businesses abroad to destinations such as Türkiye, Georgia, Armenia, and to a lesser extent Central Asia (Matusevich 2022). When Russian authorities announced a partial mobilization of men of military age in late September 2022, to compensate for the losses of manpower in Ukraine, the announcement caused many Russians to leave the country in response. Some estimates suggest that by early 2023 between 700,000 and 1,200,000 Russians may have left the country since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Gulina 2022). This exodus has implications not just for Russian internal politics but also for societies in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, where most of these Russians moved. While such countries as Türkiye, Thailand, and Vietnam received a considerable number of draft-dodgers, countries of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia and the South Caucasus were the main destinations. Zavadskaya, Kamalov, and Sergeeva's chapter in this volume (Chapter 8) discusses the potential influence of the emigrant Russian diaspora on Russian internal politics following the exodus of Russians to other countries after the start of the

war in Ukraine. Here, we intend to briefly examine the potential implications of this migration for societies in Central Asia.

Central Asia has historically been a destination for migration from Russia, with many ethnic Russians migrating to the region during Tzarist and Soviet times. However, in recent years the flow of migration has largely been in the opposite direction, with many Central Asians migrating to Russia for work and economic opportunities. The recent exodus of Russians from Russia may lead to a reversal of this trend, with some ethnic Russians returning to Central Asia. Russians have chosen Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for emigration due to various factors. These include visa-free entry, direct border lines with Russia (in the case of Kazakhstan), a relatively low cost of living, favourable conditions for legalization, and the prevalence of the Russian language, especially in large cities (Pheiffer 2022). Russians may have found it easier to integrate into these societies due to shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds, as well as existing social networks. Even as the long-term integration of Russians remains an open question, it is still important to note that a considerable number have managed to settle across Central Asia.

The arrival of many Russians to Central Asia has had a mixed reaction across the region. The situation has led to concerns about the impact on local cultures and traditions. The war in Ukraine has sparked discussions on decolonial discourse among Eurasian and international scholars, with some calling on Russians to acknowledge Russia's imperial identity, including the colonial nature of the Soviet regime, to improve their relations with neighbouring countries (countries formerly part of the Soviet Union) and the West (Kassymbekova and Marat 2022). Some people fear that Russians, with their imperial mindset, may become a 'fifth column' and aid the Russian government in its neocolonial discourse. Referring to the concerns of local activists, Sergey Abashin (2023, paragraph 7) mentions that:

> on the one hand, they [locals] see migrants as competitors and, on the other hand, as a group that could reproduce the old Soviet

> divisions, when locals used to occupy lower positions, while outsiders used to get the higher ones … with ‘Russians’ being the more prestigious group. Locals had already become accustomed to occupying more prestigious positions and they are kind of afraid that the Russians will come and try to build an empire.

The way in which the Russians are referred to highlights the varying attitudes towards their mass arrival, in turn reflecting people’s stance on the war in Ukraine. Russians generally prefer to be called *relokanty*, which refers to employees relocated abroad by their companies. A part of the local population in receiving countries, opposing the war, refers to them as refugees, while others see them as draft-dodgers who have shirked their duty to defend their motherland in times of need. For some observers, the migration of Russians, either short term or long term, to Central Asia is a ‘humbling moment’, as Russians, who had always perceived themselves to be privileged both in the Soviet Union and in contemporary Russia, now find themselves as guests in independent countries (Meduza 2023). Overall, people’s perception of the arrival of Russians highlights the complex interplay between migration, Soviet legacies, authoritarianism, and cultural shifts.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to create an overview of Russian security policy developments, migration policy as a part of the national security thinking, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Eurasian migration and refugee situation. It argues that the radicalization of Russian illiberal politics has resulted in an unprecedented upheaval of the economic, political, and military landscape in the former socialist space of Eurasia. The analysis points to the fact that Russian illiberalism has formed a loose state ideology resulting in a balancing act between political and economic goals in the Global East and Global South and utilizing forced migration and refugees as a hybrid tool to influence the outcome of the war.

At the heart of the Russian policymaking and administration lie the problematic relations of the three branches of government, both formal and informal, which are critical for the development of a country's legal culture. Borrowing the definitions of illiberalism of Kauth and King (2020) we state that Russia's post-socialist security thinking has evolved around both ideological illiberalism, which underlines sovereignty, nationhood, and majoritarianism (Laruelle 2022), and disruptive illiberalism, which challenges international norms, which Russia again sees as interfering with its internal affairs, as did the Soviet Union. The war, initiated already in 2014, can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of Russian illiberalism, as it has showcased the country's shift towards an ideology that prioritizes a highly centralized administrative system and authoritarian narrow economic modernization, accepts weak legal protection, and underlines nationalism in many key policy areas. Russia's legislative and administrative developments have led to the application of international law in a selective way and to an oppositional attitude towards democratic processes. The independence of the judiciary has been replaced with the broad discretion of the executive, which has also impacted the outcomes of migration policy. The exploitation of migration as a form of warfare further highlights the illiberal politics and disregard for human rights.

Consequently, the war in Ukraine and the resulting migration crisis have had profound political, economic, and social implications for Russia and Central Asia. The influx of Ukrainian refugees into Europe has put pressure on host societies and raised concerns about integration and the economic sustainability of required social services. Additionally, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia have had a significant impact on its economy, affecting the largest employer of Central Asian migrant workers. This has led to economic and social pressures in Central Asia's remittance-dependent countries.

The changed conditions for labour migration as a result of Western sanctions have created new challenges for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, as the return of several hundred

thousand migrants from Russia has put pressure on their vulnerable economies. The resulting social dissent, driven by declining living standards and unemployment, may exacerbate existing tensions and create new challenges for these regimes. Migration, particularly the high number of workers leaving their home countries for employment opportunities in other countries, can serve as a safety valve for sending-country governments by reducing domestic unemployment and social unrest. In turn, receiving authoritarian governments relying on neoliberal economic policies can effectively use globalized migration as a means of maintaining elite consolidation through economic growth and control of mass media information and discussion about migration; restrict the work of NGOs and unions; and coerce both migrants and sending countries through the weak legal status of migrants. Given these challenges, it is unclear how governments in the Eurasian region will respond. While some may choose to undertake much-needed political and economic liberalization to address the consequences of the war, others could resort to tighter authoritarian rule.

Overall, the war in Ukraine and the migration crisis have exposed the deepening illiberalism in Russia and its impact on neighbouring regions. The consequences of this crisis will continue to unfold in the short and medium term, shaping the political, economic, and social dynamics of Eurasia. The response of governments in the region will determine whether there will be a shift towards political and economic liberalization or a further consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Ultimately, the way in which labour migration is addressed is likely to have significant implications for the future of illiberalism in the region. For this reason, we propose to pay attention to the responses of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia to social dissent stemming from the return of migrant workers from Russia, as well as the integration processes of other migrant groups which have left Russia since the outbreak of the war. This line of inquiry offers a nuanced understanding of how these regimes navigate social tensions and dissent within their societies. By analysing the policy choices made by governments, as well as the

implementation of their decisions—whether they opt for political and economic liberalization or tighten authoritarian controls to maintain stability—researchers can shed light on the delicate balance of state power, social cohesion, and dissent in authoritarian contexts. At the same time, probing the impact which diaspora communities have on Russia and its future politics offers insights into the resilience of Russian illiberal politics and its future trajectories.

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CHAPTER 10

Conclusions

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As we conclude this edited volume, we reflect on the mutual impact of global migration and illiberalism in the broader context of the REEE (Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe) area. The legacy of the socialist system looms large, leaving an indelible mark on the socio-political landscape. Authoritarian states with weakening democracy in the REEE, while influenced by this historical backdrop, exhibit a complex relationship with globalization. Political decisions are made in structures which are not only shaped by domestic considerations but are also deeply entwined with the globalized markets and the shadow economy that transcend national borders economically and culturally. Understanding

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illiberal politics in the REEE demands a nuanced grasp of such effects of globalization.

The drastic economic transition policies of the 1990s, coupled with a foreign policy backlash against perceived grievances, gave rise to illiberal tendencies. Economic growth, driven by globalized economic and institutional competition, paradoxically led to elitist economic policies, oligarchic power concentration, and the intertwining of neoliberal markets with selective nationalistic agendas. The REEE area presents an intriguing case study through which to interrogate the nexus between illiberal politics under different regime types and their migration policies. It comprises totalitarian states, nominally democratic autocracies, and declining and established democracies. Though the transition to democracy and market economies meant challenging the authoritarian and illiberal features of the former socialist regimes, political institutions, public administrations, and judiciaries are to varying degrees influenced by the legal and administrative cultures of the socialist period.

The question of whether illiberalism is the root cause or an outcome of these structural and cultural features remains a complex one. We have argued that illiberalism emerges as both a catalyst and a consequence of various challenges, such as inequality, political division, informality in government, and erosion of societal rules. As a political stance influencing state–society relations by diverging from democratic liberal values, illiberalism finds its way into political goals and policy processes, often uniting seemingly unrelated groups under its banner. Democratic backsliding is seldom a drastic rupture like, for example, an authoritarian revolution; it is more often a slow and gradual process. Typically, democratic institutions and regimes formally remain un-attacked, but they are crippled or co-opted by the ruling elite. In some cases illiberal backsliding can be a temporary phase, connected to the rule of some political party or leader, but it can also be a more long-term development if democratic institutions and checks and balances are severely eroded (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 453). For

this reason, the study of illiberalism as a political viewpoint and agenda is an extremely timely endeavour.

We underline the importance of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation in the examination of the illiberalism–migration nexus. Migration is a 'signature issue' (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 433) of illiberal politics and its criticism of liberalism. Portrayals of liberalism as characterized by open borders policy, coupled with demands to prioritize national security and economy over the 'luxury' of human, minority, and migrant rights, also have a populist appeal in many countries and are therefore an efficient means of gathering support for the illiberal political agenda. Illiberal political actors thus implicitly tap into the liberal paradox (Hollifield 1992). Illiberalism accuses liberalism of hypocrisy, and in migration policy this charge often seems quite justified. As Virkkunen, Silvan, and Piipponen also argue in this volume (Chapter 7), it is possible to notice illiberal features in the very structure of European migration policies, not to mention in such practices as the pushing back of asylum seekers from the borders of the EU. Thus, it can be suggested that migration is one of the policy areas where the erosion of such liberal-democratic principles as respect for international laws and agreements may begin.

In the course of European history, the way in which the concepts of liberalism and illiberalism have been understood and used has undergone many changes. Thus, all theoretical models of them also inevitably reflect their own time and context. Occasionally, contemporary conceptualizations of illiberalism seem to have been drafted to describe specific cases such as, for example, Orbán's Hungary. However, there are notable differences in contemporary illiberal politics. For example, welfare nationalism and criticism of liberal individualism is quite common in the illiberal politics of many European parties but, unsurprisingly, anti-individualism or redistributive social policies do not configure in Trumpian illiberal political rhetoric (Smilova 2021, 194). More comparative studies would further discussions about both variance in and core features of illiberal politics.

Our examination of the nexus of illiberalism and global migration within the REEE area has focused on two distinct ambitions. First, we have analysed how migratory flows present both opportunities for and challenges to illiberal governance practices. Migration contributes to political polarization, restrictive immigration policies, xenophobia, and discrimination, prompting a typical illiberal response of securitization in policymaking. Second, we have explored how illiberalism, in turn, shapes, influences, and capitalizes on migration to advance political goals. This complex relationship is a two-way street, as migration processes can simultaneously challenge illiberal political objectives by fostering diversity, networking, democracy promotion, and political empowerment. Examples of these contradictions are presented in, for instance, Dmitry Kurnosov in Chapter 5, which demonstrates how developments in the administrative and legal sphere in Russia have been intertwined in the emergence of illiberal politics in migration policy. Another example is in Ajar Chekirova's chapter, where the analysis shows that virtual spaces where diaspora communities gather are a venue of persistent contention between liberal and illiberal ideas, and that these venues are furthermore utilized by both state and non-state actors to mobilize for action (Chapter 6). By adopting our dual perspective on the illiberalism–migration nexus, the contributors in this edited volume, through their cases, provide an understanding of how migration becomes a pivotal factor in shaping political discourse, policies, and governance practices within the context of illiberal states.

Through our interdisciplinary approach that draws on political science, sociology, law, and international relations, among other fields, the volume achieves a comprehensive examination of the complex interplay between migration and illiberalism. This interdisciplinary lens contributes to a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in navigating migration dynamics within illiberal contexts. We invite further academic exploration, encouraging a deepened understanding of the complex relationships uncovered. Potential avenues for research emerge, calling for continued inquiry into the evolving nature of

illiberal politics (its ways of thinking and practices), the resilience of democratic processes in the face of migration challenges, and the role of diaspora communities in shaping the political landscape. This becomes especially important as one of the largest military conflicts in the region since the Second World War is ongoing, with superpowers aiming to change political boundaries.

Migration will continue to be an important societal and political force in the future. Climate change and degradation of the environment in many parts of Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe will challenge governments, communities, and individuals to find coping strategies. The examination of illiberalism in this context offers a framework for future investigations into how global geopolitical shifts, economic and labour market changes, and technological advancements might influence governance structures, policies, and practices. Understanding the adaptive strategies of illiberal regimes in response to such external forces and their impact on migration dynamics could provide valuable insights for scholars and policymakers alike. Investigating how illiberal regimes recalibrate their policies and narrative frameworks over time, especially in the aftermath of crises, stands as a promising avenue for research. This temporal dimension could uncover patterns of resilience or vulnerability within illiberal structures and inform predictions regarding their future trajectories.

In essence, this edited volume, while a significant contribution, stands as a starting point for an ongoing academic conversation that promises to shed light on the mutual impact of migration and illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe. The complex nature of these interactions invites continued exploration, encouraging scholars to dig deeper into the evolving dynamics, uncovering new facets of the relationship between migration and illiberal governance in this region. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, this academic discourse remains crucial for comprehending the diverse challenges and opportunities that define the intersection of migration and illiberalism in this region.

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Introductory Note

References such as '178–179' indicate (not necessarily continuous) discussion of a topic across a range of pages. Wherever possible in the case of topics with many references, these have either been divided into sub-topics or only the most significant discussions of the topic are listed. Because the entire work is about 'global migration' and 'illiberalism', the use of these terms (and certain others which occur constantly throughout the book) as an entry point has been restricted. Information will be found under the corresponding detailed topics. Cross-references in a form such as 'destination countries, see also individual countries' direct the reader to headings in a particular class (e.g. in this case 'Poland') rather than a specific 'individual countries' entry.

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