UDC 314.15(=161.1)
https://doi.org/10.18485/ms_zmss.2023.104.2

Ekaterina Purgina
IFDT University of Belgrade
CAS SEE University of Rijeka
kathy13@yandex.ru

Andrey Menshikov
University of Central Asia
andreimenchikov@gmail.com

DIGITAL NARRATIVES OF THE NEW RUSSIAN EMIGRANTS: IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS ACROSS BORDERS AND BORDERLINES

An estimated 820,000 to 920,000 Russian citizens have emigrated since February 2022, with many turning to social media platforms, notably Telegram, for uncensored information and support networks. This study aims to analyze how Russian emigrants construct their identities through digital storytelling. Their digital narratives are polyphonic, fragmented, and open-ended; they allow emigrants to experiment with their identities in a new environment while grappling with the disruption caused by their sudden departure. The study also examines the concepts emigrants use to describe their status, including "refugees" and "relocants." The concept of home undergoes transformation in emigrants' narratives, as the possibility of returning to their former lives is becoming increasingly remote. Nevertheless, the emigrants' integration into host communities is impacted by the enduring divisions from their homeland (between those who are pro-war and anti-war, between "leavers" and "remainers").

Key words: digital narratives, Russian emigrants, narrative analysis, home, identity

Introduction

In February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a large-scale emigration from both countries. The first Russian wave, known as the *February wave*, consisted mostly of civic activists and individuals with strong oppositional views. People who abhorred the war but required more preparation, such as business owners or entire families, were leaving the country continuously over the spring and summer of 2022. These emigrants had higher education, income, and profes-

* We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Southeast European Solidarity Fellowship 2023 (IPST/CAS SEE) for making this research possible.

sional skills, and so were able to sustain themselves abroad in the short- and medium-term. Experts' estimates suggest that around a half of them (46%) work in the IT sector (Kamalov et al. 2022).

Another wave — the *September wave* — was triggered by the announcement of "partial mobilization", causing close to 400,000 mostly draft-age men to flee with minimal resources, often without foreign passports (as of 4 October 2022) (Gizitdinov & Bedwell 2022) and with little understanding of what they were going to do once they cross Russia's border (Selizarova 2022). A large number of these men returned once the fear of conscription subsided or resources ran out.

By the most conservative estimates, after February 24, 2022, roughly 820,000–920,000 Russian citizens emigrated from the country, with Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Serbia, and Armenia as the top destinations (Re:Russia (b) 2023).

Remarkably, in contrast to average Russians' distrust of institutions and individuals, recent migration waves have shown high levels of interpersonal trust among the émigrés. These groups of people show "a higher level of generalised trust, including trust in fellow emigrants as well as those who have remained in Russia" (Kostenko et al. 2022). Emigrants are using social media platforms to build horizontal support networks among themselves and with local communities.

For the new Russian emigrants, social media have proven to be more than a valuable resource for everyday solidarity where indispensable information on immigration rules, accommodation, job vacancies, children and pet services can be found[1]. Social media provided a safe platform for people's reflections on what had happened to them and to their country. They were all placed not merely in a practically strenuous but in a morally challenging situation and sought to find justification of their decision to leave or to return. Sociologist Lyubov Borusyak, who conducted two interview surveys of the new Russian emigrants in April and September 2022, emphasizes their eagerness to tell the stories of their emigration and believes that emigrants are using storytelling as a coping strategy (Radio Svoboda 2022). Narratives help people make sense of their world, especially if life has to change dramatically. Today these stories are increasingly produced and read on social media.

---

[1] The events of February 2022 gave rise to a number of new popular Telegram channels as well as drastically influenced the content of some already existing ones, especially those that belonged to online media whose websites were blocked e. g. *Relocation.guide*, the latter also known under the name "Guide for Relocation from the RF to Free World", *Meduza, Mediazone, Kholod, Novaya Gazeta*. Telegram channels spreading information for emigrants and about emigrants differ significantly both in their content and in their purposes — some aim to provide practical information (e. g. *Helpdeskmedia, Relocation.guide* or *Pogranichny_kontrol* (Border Control)), others focus more on delivering news updates and analytics (e. g. *Mediazone*), some are focused on life in specific countries and spaces (e. g. channels for those who have relocated to Georgia, Armenia, etc), some place more emphasis on giving voice to people seeking to describe their experiences and tell their stories, acting as aggregators of emigrants' narratives (e. g. *Ochevidtsy* (Witnesses), *I my uleteli* (And we flew away)); there are also individual channels created by emigrants to advise others and/or describe their travel experiences.

In digital environments the message can reach an infinite number of different audiences by circulating on various platforms and, thus, it exists in a 'context collapse' (Georgakopoulou 2015), which means that digital narratives have a much bigger outreach than is expected by their authors. These narratives are scrutinized by a diverse audience ranging from those who share the emigrants' fate and those who stayed in Russia to those who host them in their destination countries (Banulescu-Bogdan et al. 2021). These accounts of emigration are used for legitimizing certain policies on the 'new migrants' both in host and in (formerly) home countries (Sahin-Mencutek 2020).

Russian emigrants themselves are often uncertain about their status. While they they may be wary of identifying themselves as emigrants or refugees, they tend to use a variety of self-designations, such as 'leavers' (*uekhavshie*) or 'relocants' (*relokanty*) (Kostenko et al. 2023). Their departure, or relocation, nevertheless, was a political response of Russian citizens to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was only spurred by the ensuing political repression of anti-war protests, elimination of any remaining independent media, and later by mobilization for the iniquitous war.

The bans the Russian authorities imposed on various media, including Facebook and Instagram in March 2022, caused a record increase in the amount of content published daily on Telegram and in the number of its daily active users. According to Forbes, the total number of non-unique subscribers of Russian-language Telegram channels in 2022 doubled from 1 billion to 2 billion (Demidkina 2023). Since Telegram favors text over graphics (like WhatsApp and earlier banned Twitter) and prioritizes user privacy (unlike VKontakte), it has become the key source of uncensored news as well as the main channel for people both inside and outside Russia to share safely personal information and exchange their experiences.

According to Re:Russia project, the majority of young internet users in Russia are engaged with Telegram, it is also 'the most politicized social network: over 40% of its channels are news-based, and around 17% are directly related to the war and Ukraine' (Re:Russia (a) 2023). Thus, Telegram has become one of the most important sources of real-time information about the war as well as a major platform for communication on public and common matters (Re:Russia (a) 2023).

The main aim of this study is to analyze how Russian emigrants construct their new identities through digital storytelling. To this end, we are going to examine how emigrants use digital narratives to address the questions as to why they chose to leave and who they have become now. Their stories create new distinctions between "us" and "them," in particular regarding the *ethical*[2] *divi-*

[2] We chose to call this division ethical rather than political because the invasion caused moral horror across the political spectrum. There were obviously various fears, sometimes overlapping, such as fear of persecution, of economic losses due to sanctions, of conscription, or fear for the future of the children, etc. But the motivating force behind mobility decisions was reported to be the repulsion caused by the invasion.

sion (pro-war vs. anti-war). This ethical divide was expressed in mobility decisions and resulted in a *spatial division* — those who have left vs. those who have stayed. It is important to note that "leavers" and "remainers" belong to the same anti-war community, the animosity between them, however, was sometimes astounding; pro-war, or Z-patriots, are, thus, not "remainers" by default. We are also interested in the *temporal division*, because emigrants have to construct their narratives around the temporal thresholds (invasion, departure, potential return, etc.).

The analysis focuses on six narratives found through the Telegram search engine and through "aggregator" Telegram channels (primarily '*I my uleteli*' (https://t.me/weflewaway) — 'And we flew away'). Although there is a considerable variety of channels created by and for Russian emigrants after 24 February 2022, not all of them were deemed suitable for our research as we were particularly interested in the channels where the experience of emigration and emigrant identity were foregrounded, rather than those mostly aimed at providing information and assistance to current or prospective emigrants. In the given period (from February 2022 to February 2023), all of the channels were publicly open (no invitation to join the channel was required) and postings were made on a regular basis. While in most channels the comments feature was activated and discussion was encouraged, at least in one this feature was disabled as of the time of analysis. The reactions feature was enabled in all of the channels. All of the channels were created in the period following 24 February 2022. The analysis covers the publications made in the period from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023.

Judging by the information in their Telegram channels, all narrators are young or middle-aged professionals, have a higher education, and come from large Russian cities (Ekaterinburg, St.Petersburg, Moscow) (for more information see Appendix). Five of them are female and one, male. Two of the narrators have school-age children: one of them is divorced and the other emigrated with her partner; one more narrator gave birth during the year following her emigration. All of the narrators appear to have sufficient income or savings to cover their expenses in the host country (or countries), including the ability to buy property or rent an apartment. They have all chosen countries with facilitated visa regimes or visa-free countries (e.g. Turkey, Serbia, Argentina, Montenegro), which means that for them the process of border crossing and emigration in general ran faster and was less complicated than if they had chosen, for instance, EU countries. All of the narrators share the anti-war stance.

During their first year of emigration, narrators continued following the political and social agenda of their country of origin. In their online postings, they challenge the official rhetoric of the Russian government and the militarist patriotic discourse of the so-called "Z-patriots" (people who are actively pro-war). Additionally, narrators contribute to the online discussions about the collective guilt and responsibility and respond to the popular criticisms directed against "Russian relocants" in the Russian-speaking online space. They make claims against the stigmatization and discrimination of Russian emigrants as citizens

of the aggressor state (as one of the narrators puts it, "people-with-not-the-right-kind-of-passports"). These discussions provide a broader social and ideological context of life both inside and outside Russia in whose background new emigrants' identities are shaped.

Digital storytelling

To understand identity (re)construction, narrative studies explore "an individual's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future in a unified, aspirational sense of self" (McAdams 2013: 3). In this perspective, "multiple, mutable, and socially constructed" identities coexist within a self that tries to integrate diverse experiences into a relatively coherent whole (Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010: 137). Storytelling is the primary means of identity work, through which individuals construct and reconstruct their identities over time.

Methodologically, we rely on the analytical framework described by Marita Eastmond in her studies of forced migrants' narratives (see Eastmond 2006; Eastmond 2007). In her work, Eastmond shows how storytelling is used by migrants for a variety of purposes, primarily "to create a sense of continuity in who they are, linking selves in different ways to time and place" (Eastmond 2007: 254). Particular contexts in which narratives are generated result in that the "stories are never transparent renditions of reality, but partial and selective versions of it, arising out of social interaction" (Eastmond 2007: 260). Eastmond proposes to focus on the organizing themes, tropes and metaphors of such stories and on the ways they embrace or challenge the so-called grand narratives or collectively shared paradigms (e. g. those of refugee movements and diasporas) (Eastmond 2007: 254). In the social media environment, such as Telegram, however, small stories constitute much of digital storytelling (Georgakopoulou 2022). ***Small stories*** are accounts of daily routines, mundane events, interchanges with other online users, personal responses to news items, etc. Small stories aggregate into longer narratives of emigrants' experiences. The narratives reflect the emigrants' evolving identity behind a myriad of nuances of their daily lives in a host country. In other words, small stories deal with trivial events of daily life and help preserve (or reconstruct) emigrants' identity by downscaling major disruptions in their lives. They prioritize here-and-now, showcasing very recent, sometimes ongoing events; in Georgakopoulu's terms, they are a "life-writing of the moment" (Georgakopoulu 2015; Dayter & Muhleisen 2016)). As the author of the *@lalalanam* channel explains:

> My feelings about the evacuation to Serbia so far have been the following: It becomes easier when you switch from one big problem that you cannot solve to a bunch of small problems that can be solved. In Russia red tape is something that bothers you rather than comforts. Here it feels as if you are going through a quest in which you have to recite incantations ('otvorite racun', 'beli karton',

> ‘nema boravak’[3]) while being in a certain location in order to get a key to the door to the next level (here and thereafter translation from Russian into English is ours — *E. P. & A. M.*).

The storytelling on social media platforms entails a continuous iterative process with posts being published on a more or less regular basis over a certain period of time and unfolds in chronological and/or retrospective order. M. Bamberg argues that small stories play a key role in people’s “interactive engagements” in “local identity work”, which, in its turn, results in “displays of a sense of self” (Bamberg 2004).

Recent emigrants’ disrupted lives and “spoiled identities” as the Russians felt stigmatized regardless of their political attitudes to war were reconstituted in and through their small stories. One of the narrators in our selection of Telegram channels draws a comparison between her new life abroad and an episode from Miyazaki’s animated film *Howl’s Moving Castle* where fire demon Calcifer is “rebuilding the castle to meet the new needs. Widening it here, removing some elements there. It remains familiar, yet not quite the same”. She concludes:

> …it turned out I can rebuild myself almost from scratch in a couple of months, throwing away almost everything. Except, obviously, work. People, locations, habits, food, rituals, plans — it all turned into ashes (*Or vovnutr*).

Each of the narratives in question is an attempt to stitch together the past, the present, and even more uncertain future by rebuilding the new identity in the light of the changing circumstances of life.

Small stories on social media, not unlike other digitally disseminated content, share characteristics such as interactivity and hypertextuality, fragmentation, non-linearity and open-endedness. Telegram enables narrators to include hyperlinks to other channels or platforms, to illustrate their texts with photos or even build their posts around visual, audio or video materials as the key elements, providing them with brief captions, share memes or the posts of other users, YouTube videos, etc. As T. Heyd puts it, “…the digital construction of stories as they are related to identity and concepts of belonging increasingly rely on multimodal resources” (Heyd 2016: 298). Hashtags are employed to highlight specific topics, make a certain point, and to structure the narratives (e. g. the hashtag *#мысливслух* (literally “thinking aloud”) is used to contrast ruminations with more practical information).

The authors generally address their narratives to a “generic sympathetic reader” whose background and views are roughly similar to theirs (i. e., Russian-speaking, anti-war), the actual audience may differ dramatically from the imagined audience (this actual audience is also what L. West aptly refers to as “overhearers” (West 2013)). While the analysis of actual and imagined audience

---

[3] These are the common phrases in the Serbian language that immigrants come across during their efforts to legalize their status: “open a [bank] account,” “registration of stay,” and “lack of a residence permit.”

in these digital narratives and the narrators' interactions with it, — the reception of digital storytelling, — falls beyond the scope of this study, it would still be useful to outline the imagined (or intended) audience that plays a key role in how the narratives are constructed.

Firstly, while the authors presumably know foreign languages, their narratives are written in Russian and intended primarily for Russian-speaking people. Secondly, these audiences are expected to be actively anti-war, as the narrators explicitly express their stance in the introductory post to their channels and/or in their bios. Thirdly, while members of the imagined audience could reside either inside or outside of Russia, since each channel focuses on the vicissitudes of emigration, it can be assumed that the imagined audience mostly consists of emigrants (especially to the same host country or region) or those considering the prospect of emigration in the near future. The authors of at least two channels in the sample also feature as active contributors to other channels for emigrants (*I my uleteli* — https://t.me/weflewaway). The narratives in question often contain practical information about the host countries, such as prices, living standards, instructions on how to rent an apartment, open a bank account, and deal with various government agencies. In other words, the authors easily mingle their political views and personal reflection with practical advice that might be useful to their audience(s). Finally, there is a presupposition of certain similarity in the audience's backgrounds, such as age, education, professional qualifications, and experience of living in a large city like Moscow. Some of the narratives assume a greater degree of intimate knowledge of the author's personal circumstances such as the narrator's health issues.

In their digital storytelling, Russian emigrants are at pains to reconstitute the continuity of their identity. They tell their small stories that bring forward the mundane events of everyday life and help them cope with major frustration of sudden departure from home. Social media platform Telegram affords multimodal and interactive communication that is open-ended and does not have an identifiable audience. While our narrators control the degree of possible audience engagement with privacy and reaction settings, their narratives are never monological. The narrative combination of personal and public, reflective and practical aspects in the same channel on Telegram defies boundaries of traditional literary genres such as diary, memoir, manifesto, political comment, advice, anecdote, etc. What emerges is a fragmented narrative, both in its format and in its content. Polyphonic but fragmented digital narrative allows our authors to experiment with their identity in a new country while still being deeply engrossed in the affairs of their homeland. We shall further analyze their fragmented narratives and explore how this experimentation is reflected in the search for self-appellation, discussions of departure and possible return, adaptation to expedient home, efforts to reconnect their past, present and future for preserving continuity of identity. The direct quotes may include emojis, special symbols, and hashtags as well as elements of the author's digital idiolect.

"What's in a name?": self-designations of new Russian migrants (emigrants, refugees, relocants, ponaekhi, uekhavshiye)

As emigration can cause significant disruptions to established notions of home, belonging, and personal identity, it is natural that the narratives in question revolve primarily around two interconnected questions: who we are and where we belong. The new Russian emigrants struggle to find the appropriate terms to describe themselves. None of the available terms, including "emigrants" or "relocants", seems to these authors to capture their situation and experience. The efforts at self-identification are often intertwined with the efforts to justify their choice to leave. The emigrants often report being asked the question "Why have you left?" by their friends and acquaintances remaining in Russia. A common strategy of trying to comprehend their new identity and status is for the narrators to draw historical and literary parallels with the experience of other emigrants, especially those fleeing from Nazi Germany and the people who left Russia in the post-revolutionary wave of emigration (the so-called White Emigration). Interestingly, while some terms are used by the narrators to describe both their personal situation and their affiliation with the broader community of people who left Russia after February 24th (e. g., "relocants" or "emigrants"), others, likely due to their additional connotations, may carry a tone that is derogatory (e. g., *ponaekhi* — literally "those who have recently arrived" but, in fact, "unwelcome immigrants"), which could be one of the reasons why they are used more broadly rather than personally.

'Relokanty' appears to be one of the most frequently used terms. Before 24 February 2022, in the Russian language, the word *relokatsiya* ("relocation") was primarily associated with business communication and was used to denote the movement of a business from one place to another (Levontina & Shmeleva 2023)[4]. While many of those Russians who left the country in the February wave indeed were "relocated" by their companies, the words *relokatsiya* (relocation), *relotsirovatsya* (to relocate) and *relokant* (a person who relocated) acquired broader meanings and denoted emigration in general — 'leaving the country because of the war and mobilization' (Levontina & Shmeleva 2023).

Many of those Russians who left the country after 24 February prefer to be called "relocants" rather than "emigrants" because the term "relocation" is "not yet loaded with so many political connotations as 'emigration'" (Meduza 2023). These people are also seeking to avoid the psychological discomfort of having to accept the fact that they might have left their country for good. By admitting the fact that they are "emigrants", they would have to deal with the prospect of integrating with the hosting country, of acquiring new legal status and potentially another citizenship, which may be too painful. Moreover, a "relocant" retains their sense of agency: "'emigration' is a disaster while 'relocation' is an adventure. 'Emigration' is about forever while 'relocation' is more about 'we'll see how it goes'" (Signal 2022).

---

[4] In 2022, this word was selected as one of the three "words of the year", together with *voyna* (war) and *mobilizatsiya* (mobilization) (Levontina & Shmeleva 2023).

Emigrantka s detmi critically examines various conventional self-identifications and finds them inadequate in capturing the complexity of her emigration experience. Although she did not have to flee as a forcibly displaced person, her emigration was not entirely voluntary either. She hesitates to view it as a definitive decision but she also lacks a clear timeline for her return to Russia:

> The very first question: who am I, an emigrant? Migrant? Refugee? I don't think I can be called a «relocant,» as it seems to me. Migrants are those who move to another place temporarily, hoping to go back. This is me. On the other hand, there is no understanding as to the specific time of my return. …
>
> A refugee? What kind of refugee can make someone from Moscow? Yes, I packed my flat in 3 weeks, it was difficult, but of course it was not done under a missile attack, and I managed to take enough things to be comfortable in a new home. But what shall I do with these feelings I had when I was leaving: that I am no more wanted here, I am a nuisance, I don't understand and I don't share the values of these people, I am not afraid of the attack of the collective West on Russia, I don't want to "defend our Motherland against NATO"?
>
> Emigrants leave "for good" (I am using inverted commas for good because everything is relative). I do NOT want to move for good. I do not see my life in any other country. ...
>
> Relocants … this word I don't understand at all. Maybe it's too young (sic! — *E. P. & A. M.*). I also have a vague feeling that it is some sort of Aesopian language, a euphemistic way to cover something unpleasant in real life, something that one doesn't want to call by its real name: that we have found ourselves in the dumbest situation, in emigration we haven't planned but nonetheless, here we are[5].

The ambivalence about the (in)voluntariness of emigration is shared by all the narratives under consideration. The author of the channel *Or vovnutr* deplores that "all of us were swept once again by the wind of change from our motherland" and "being pulled like a carrot from the garden bed". In the same post, she employs different concepts such as exile, forced emigration, and flight, when she describes her experience:

> Intelligentsia in exile, this is what we have decided to call it. Intelligentsia, scrapping the last dregs of cash out of ATMs while their cards in a blink of an eye were turning into mere pieces of plastic. 10 years ago I could hardly imagine that I would be caught by the whirlpool of forced emigration amid the state collapse. Or even flight — let's call things their real names, for this is the reason why we fled. For the first time in your life you do not belong anywhere and you are not needed anywhere.

Alternatively, *Pereselents — Serbia* points out that to emigrate was his own choice. He left in search of a better life rather than in an effort to escape the deteriorating situation in his home country:

> Personally, I consider myself not so much of a relocant, not even an emigrant, but more of a resettler. Emigrant is a person who is fleeing from something. As for

---

[5] This post is accompanied by the photo of a footless sculpture "The Immigrant" by Enrique Martinez Celaya.

> me, I am looking for a place where I have more freedom and opportunities for development. It is an important, fundamental difference: for someone the glass is half-full and for someone, half-empty.

In Telegram channels devoted to emigration and in online communities on other platforms, a popular term to describe the new Russian emigrants is the colloquial word *ponaekhi or ponaekhavshie.* It is worth noting that initially, the word *ponaekhavshie* was used as a derogatory term denoting people migrating in large numbers from provinces to megapolis in search of a better life[6]. This word reflects the perspective of the locals and their seeing the newcomers as intruders. This word is now used in the discourse of the new Russian emigrants. There are also popular hashtags such as *#ponaehi* or *#понаехи* used on various social media platforms to mark the topics relevant to emigrant life. *Pereselents-Serbia* makes the following comment about the relationship between *ponaekhi* of 2022 and those who immigrated before them:

> Every day I meet new immigrants. Lately, more and more often, I've been hearing stories about those who came here half a year, a year, two years ago already feel local and the *newcomers* [italics — ours, this word is used in English by the author — *E. P. & A. M.*], not jokingly but in earnest, are called "ponaekhi".

Another term that is circulated in emigrants' narratives is *uekhavshiye* ("those who have left"), which stands in implicit (or sometimes explicit) opposition to *ostavshiyesya* ("those who have stayed"). It is mentioned, for example, by the channel *Or Vovnutr*: 'Many of those who have left are now speaking of the new points of reference and new normality'. *Emigrantka s detmi* delves into the distinction between "those who stayed" and "those who left" in her post titled "Rhetoric of those who have left", where she discusses the heated, and sometimes bitter, debates between the two camps on social media. This author frames the reasons for her departure in parallel to Russian emigration after the October Revolution of 1917:

> In my Soviet childhood we were taught about Russian composers of the 20th century. For example, Rakhmaninov. The 'great Russian composer' was an emigrant. But a successful one. Therefore, in our textbook they tried to put it nicely: "Sergey Vasilyevich did not accept the October Revolution and left Russia". So did I! Like Rakhmaninov. I did not accept the SMO [Special Military Operation — E. P. & A. M.].

Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh emphasizes the moral dimension of departing her country during a crisis, framing her decision to leave as a form of compromise with her conscience. She raises a poignant question: "Leave Russia now — does it mean making a deal with your conscience?" To which she answers: "For me — yes. But now, after about a month of all this shit going on, I made this deal with my eyes open."

---

[6] For more on this see, for example, the semantic analysis of this word by Ildiko Palosi (2020).

It should be noted at this point that, unlike the word *ponaekhi*, which appears to refer almost exclusively to those who emigrated after February 24, *uekhavshiye* roughly can cover all the people who emigrated from Russia in the last decades.

In search of a denomination that would capture their uncertain situation Russian emigrants use a variety of terms stemming from formal legal contexts such as emigrants, refugees, relocants. The latter was picked up from business usage when many companies moved their staff and operations outside Russia. But for many individuals, "relocation" is preferable because it attenuates the finality of emigration and mitigates the ineluctability of the flight. "Relocation" leaves the option of returning open, on the one hand, and accentuates agency and choice, on the other. Unlike mobility-focused notions of migration and relocation, more spatially specific terms such as *ponaekhi (*or *ponaekhavshie)* and *uekhavshiye* highlight destination and are informal. Their directionality reflects the ambiguous attitudes towards migrants. While *uekhavshiye* (leavers) is more neutral and may now cover all generations of Russian emigrants, *ponaekhi* harks back to traditionally negative attitudes of Russians towards provincial Russians, Central Asian or Transcaucasian immigrants in large Russian cities. The term is now transposed onto Russian newcomers in their current Transcaucasian, Balkan, Central Asian, and other residences. If used by hosts or earlier migrants towards new Russian emigrants this term, ironically, can express some resentment. Russian-language social media were engulfed in a controversy when some emigrants sought advice online on amenities habitual for their metropolitan lifestyles like notorious 'pumpkin latte' or four-layer toilet paper. But it is also used by new migrants in a self-deprecatory tone to describe their situation. Moreover, the term *ponaekhi* is temporally warped as recent migrants become "locals" or generalized *uekhavshiye* when the next wave arrives and becomes *ponaekhi*.

It is worth noting that delocalised identities such as cosmopolitan or nomadic self-designations do not gain traction. The *Or vovnutr* author rejects the idea of the "person of the world" (or a modern nomad): "No sense in pretending that I am the person of the world™[7] and that the 'serious relationship' between me and Moscow can be replaced by a warm sea or a 10-euro box of tangerines". Russia remains the center of gravity for narratives and the measure of directionality for (outbound) mobility. However, behind these mobility- or direction-related self-designations, the problem of belonging looms large. On the one hand, there is a strong connection with Russia such as intense shame for the invasion and horror of being complicit in the Russian state's aggression, which caused the departure. Collective responsibility is believed to be shared by all Russians regardless of their present location. Continuous monitoring of Russian news and involvement in discussions on Russian politics even after a year abroad indicate that no substantive rupture with Russia occurred. Yet, our narrators

[7] The narrator ironically uses a trademark symbol to mark a cliched phrase.

decided to pull out of their homes despite the costs of uprooting their entire lives. Their choice not to belong, to distance, literally, oneself from the morally repellent actions of the Russian government demonstrates the effort to separate personal identity from national identity. The attempts to reinvent their identity so far stumble upon the following challenges. It is hard (and hardly desirable) to cease to belong to Russian culture/infosphere and to have Russian as a mother tongue. It is difficult to change Russian citizenship and quite frustrating to abide its current stigma. Temporary arrangements abroad, wherever they've managed to settle, are precarious. But under the present circumstances returning to Russia seems as morally unacceptable as supporting the war.

Lost home

The moral repulsion at the war was converted into a decision to leave Russia. Thus, ethical division of anti- and pro-war attitudes resulted in a spatial division: large-scale emigration from Russia. Self-designations of emigrants were formulated around spatial mobility (relocation) and directionality (emigrants and immigrants), but the narratives extensively discuss departure and possible return as a temporal horizon constitutive of new migrants' identities. The uncertainty of their current status in the host countries only adds to the anxious attempts to define who they are and where they now belong.

The invasion shocked the narrators, it immediately alienated them from their habitual environment and, in their words, deprived them of home. *Alyona v poiskakh doma* describes 24 February as the day that "rendered completely insignificant" all her daily troubles and worries, as the day when "my whole life collapsed in ruins." Similarly, *Pereselents-Serbia* describes this rupture as a "huge, deep, gaping hole that does not allow you to stay in between — you can only be on one side or the other." The course of time does not alleviate this alienation, on the contrary, it reinforces the horror of the "new normalcy" that the narrators find terrifying: "Today is 24 April. Exactly two months. It still feels like some kind of a weird surrealist nightmare" (*Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh*). As *@lalalanam* puts it, "this is the endless Thursday that 24 February started in my world[8]". *Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh* describes the beginning of the war as the moment when she became aware of the deep "value rupture with my country" — "in a couple of days I realized, like many who were against, that I was mistaken — the number of those who were against was much smaller than those who were pro-war, be it because of fear, indifference or true belief in what was said by the propaganda". Similarly, the post on the 1-year anniversary of the war in Ukraine in the channel *Emigrantka s detmi* goes as follows:

> The next day the war broke out, and from then on, all social networks turned into something like our local community chat: who's the patriot here? I'm the big-

[8] The day when Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine — 24 February 2022 — was a Thursday.

> gest patriot, the strength of our army <...> Now I no longer felt as safe among my neighbors. And it seems many of them began to see me differently too...

In September "partial mobilization" reverberated through the still unsettled lives. *@lalalanam* describes it the following way: "by the level of horror and pain, what is happening is for me approximately on the level of February-March. Like then, it's impossible to read the news but it's equally impossible to keep myself from reading it".

This moral horror resulted in the ethical division between those who felt it and those who were shocked but not repulsed. This ethical division ruptured families, friendships, partnerships. The *Or vovnutr* author writes about her parents as brainwashed — "having television in their heads" — and includes in her post a printscreen of a message sent to her by her friend: "I've exchanged a word with your Mum. She's upset you aren't writing, your Dad's upset you are the fifth column". *Pereselenets-Serbia* takes a somewhat different view, believing that people are not so much duped by the state propaganda, but have shown their "true colors", pointing out that the war "has revealed the dark sides of the human soul, showing the true face of those whom we thought we knew well and who turned to have been hiding their true nature in the time of peace. Or maybe they did not have any face at all, just a mask that fell off".

Much of the discussion revolves around the possibility of persuading their pro-war friends and relatives to change their views. These attempts are often described as a source of frustration and pain. *Emigrantka s detmi* recounts her failed attempts to follow the tips and instructions circulated online on 'how to talk to your Z-relatives and friends', explaining why she eventually decided to 'close the topic of "having talks with Z-patriots"' for good. A dramatic change in the people they had thought they knew well appears to be particularly disturbing and repugnant. She further comments:

> An extra tinge of horror inside of me comes from the nasty feeling that there is somebody out there who is actually enjoying it, among my fellow countrymen. Maybe I even shared the same school desk with them. Examples abound — a good old friend of mine (I'm writing "good" and I can't figure out how all this can co-exist inside of him) at the end of February surprised me with a sudden flow of words I had never heard him say before: natsiki [Nazi — *E. P. & A. M.*], ukry [pejorative abbreviation of "Ukrainians" — *E. P. & A. M.*], zelya [pejorative abbreviation of "Zelensky" — *E. P & A. M.*]. What particularly horrified me was that it came from a person who spent his whole life peacefully marinating mushrooms, loving animals and never in his life had said a rude word to anybody.

The alienation from their pro-war countrymen that emerged in the aftermath of the invasion forced those who abhorred the war to leave Russia. Their departure strengthened their moral identity but undermined their habitual belonging to Russia and stigmatized their national identity. The possibility of return, however, was what helped them preserve the continuity of their identity and their sense of national identity.

Potential return

In research literature on migration and immigrant diasporas, significant attention is paid to the "myth of return", which is used by migrants to deal with the "continuing instability of identity while living away from an ancestral land — an ancestral home" and which "underlies the quest for an authentic sense of self allied to the act of "coming home"' [Ralph & Stacheli, 2011, p.522]. The myth of return (return postponed for an indefinite period, remaining "just a projection into the future in an almost mythical form" (Bocagni 2011)) is interpreted as a "cohesive force" and "glue" for the diasporic communities (Cakmak 2021; Petrou & Connell 2017). While the concept of home and the accompanying nostalgia are not so important for migrants' short-term plans, they "have significance for the ways in which migrants manage negotiations of belonging both over time and across space" (Carling et al. 2015: 19). There is much ambivalence surrounding migrants' considerations about return as "they tend to change over time and often have little to do with people's actual return plans. Rather, they have more to do with their attempts to negotiate their belonging in the transnational social field, and in relation to multiple societies" (Carling et al. 2015: 11). The intensity of immigrants' integration with the receiving community depends on their intention to return home (Bonifazi & Paparusso 2019) and their adherence to the "myth of return" (Diehl & Liebau 2014). And vice versa, over time, intentions to return may be influenced by the process of integration: as the boundaries between the immigrant and the host community start to get increasingly blurred, what initially was perceived as a firm plan to return starts to be postponed indefinitely (Carling et al. 2015).

The discussion about home and possible return is central to the narratives of new Russian emigrants examined in this study. Throughout the year, all of the narrators reported following the Russian political and social agenda on an almost daily basis. Nevertheless, the authors are largely uncertain about the possibility of a safe return and acknowledge that they may have departed Russia permanently, especially after the Russian government adopted laws that impose travel and other restrictions on draft dodgers. Unlike men, however, women feel safe enough to make brief visits to Russia for tending to essential matters, such as renting out their property and obtaining the necessary documents for themselves and their male partners. The authors make it clear that despite the strong emotional reaction they evoke, these visits are not "returning home." In two instances, the irrevocability of the decision to emigrate is underscored by the sale of property in Russia and the purchase of an apartment in the host country. At least two narrators consider an option of "step migration" — a process that involves migrating to a host country as a means of buying time and gathering information about prospective destinations, such as an EU country.

Even though the narrators repeatedly question the possibility of return, none of them appears to exclude this possibility altogether. *@lalalanam* in one of the posts makes a reference to Vladimir Putin's video address of 16 March 2022,

where he described emigration as a "natural and necessary process of self-purging of society", called people leaving the country "scum and traitors" and argued that "Russian people" will "simply spit them out like a fly that flew into their mouths"[9]. She replies in her Telegram post:

> Spit me out or not, until the last second of my life I will remain a Russian person from Russia who loves her country and tries to comprehend it. You can take away my money, health, life, but you can't take away my love for my motherland, and you can spit as much as you want. As soon as it is possible, I will dart back because only in Russia is my home, my people, and my land.

Pereselenets-Serbia draws from his own experience to make some generalizations about the new Russian emigrants in a special post where he explains to his followers the reasons why "some of the emigrants want to return to Russia", pointing out the feelings of alienation and isolation as the main factor:

> What is emigration you start to understand only after you leave. Until that moment everything you say about emigration is nothing but theoretical ramblings, utterly out of touch with real life… I quite often talk with different people and many who came here alone, without their families, note that each day they are getting more and more of the two feelings: loneliness and longing [toska — *E. P. & A. M.*].
>
> You appear to be surrounded by people — emigrants like you, with whom you can communicate, but you are still lonely because all these people are strangers. And because of this loneliness, you are engulfed by another feeling — longing. It is not nostalgia — missing your motherland…It is the longing for your family, when you are missing your close ones.

The author also is uncertain about the prospects of his own return. He explains that while the idea itself seems tempting on an emotional level, when he tries to approach it rationally, he realizes that post-war Russia would no longer be the country he once knew:

> …from time to time I start thinking that when the war ends and the regime changes, I may want to go back to Russia. But when you start to think logically and put it in a historical perspective, you come to realize that this will be a completely different Russia — not the Russia I would like to go back to and not the one, even with all its drawbacks, that had existed before February 2022.

Therefore, the realization that the return to Russia will not entail the return to the pre-war situation encapsulates home as a distant image and inaccessible reality. The author of *Or vovnutr* channel describes it the following way: "for almost all of us, like for me, Motherland got frozen in time like a fly in amber or a photograph in a frame. Shut off in one day. Turning into a rounded memory without any connections with 'today'".

The emigrants' descriptions of their brief trips to Russia highlight their apprehension of any changes and convey their surprise at observing so little difference. The perceived "normalcy" of life in their former homeland is juxtaposed

---

[9] Meeting on Measures of Socio-Economic Support for Regions. 16 March 2022. http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996

with the horrors of the ongoing war that the emigrants observe on the uncensored media. For example, *Emigrantka s detmi* in her post entitled "So, what does Moscow feel like now for me?" writes the following:

> Moscow lives as usual. Hardly changed at all. What caught my eye at the airport was that there were more people in a military uniform, looking like soldiers. Posters with the "heroes of Russia" had been seen in the streets even before our departure. Apart from that, it seems like nothing's happening. As if our soldiers are not dying, our missiles are not being shot at another country, we are not being condemned by thousands and thousands of people left without electricity or heat, for all the deaths and destruction.

Staying away from Russia and its outward "business as usual" is perceived as a way of preserving the emigrants' mental well-being and saving their moral integrity despite the practical difficulties of emigration. Weighing the pros and cons of going back to Russia, *@lalalanam* writes:

> I am thinking if it would be better to return to Moscow in order to save what is left of my foreign cash but I can't decide… Pros: back there are my friends, my money, my own house, the opportunity to consult a psychiatrist, to get a prescription for antidepressants and finally get pumped with something [*medications — E. P. & A. M.*]. Cons: it seems my mental health can be maintained by keeping the physical distance from Russia and feeling safe. I can go for a walk without the risk of seeing some kind of Z-shit. I am getting nauseous just from the very thought of going back to Moscow. I think I'll just lie on the bed, turn to the wall and never get up again.

A similar comment is made by the *Or vovnutr* author in the post where she discusses the possible reasons behind her departure, coming to the conclusion that the main reason was "because it was unbearable to think that I will get used to this".

@lalalanam mentions the dramatic change in her perception of what is going on in her home country once she left it and became an "outsider":

> What I don't like is the speed at which my loathing for Russia is growing when I am away. I noticed this in March, a few weeks after I came to Serbia, and now I notice it again. The very thought of having to come back to take care of things fills me with dread and loathing. The idea that it will happen so that I'll have to live there makes me panic.

Thus, the question of return is inextricably linked to the emigrants' contradictory sentiments towards Russia, which is both a home and an aggressor state. In their reflections on belonging they have to find the way to separate their identity of being Russian citizens and their self-image of moral individuals who abhor the war. They feel that their home was taken away from them. But, in fact, they chose to leave it in an attempt to dissociate themselves from unacceptable actions of the Russian state. While the invasion was a shock, the support of the war by the many Russians alienated our narrators from their countrymen and forced

them to leave home. The loss of home due to alienation from their state and nation, in fact, predates the departure. In their reflections on whether they might return, our narrators realize that the normalization of the war in Russia is no less unacceptable than the invasion itself. Their potential return home becomes a myth of return because the *status ante* is unrecoverable. The home is lost not only because of the distance that emigrants put between themselves and Russia, but because Russia is a different country now. Spatial and temporal aspects of the loss of home coincide in these narratives.

New home

The search for a sense of belonging constitutes the crux of all the narratives in question. The integrated self requires both continuity and belonging. Identity tends to be represented "through the home-place" (Christou 2006: 32). In D. Massey's words, a "sense of place, of rootedness" acts as a source of "unproblematic identity" (Massey 2008). Therefore, in light of the waning prospects of return, identity work shifts to the search for an answer to the question: Where is my home now?

In her bio, *Alyona v poiskakh doma* describes her loss of home[10] and claims that what she posts online is "a diary of migration". She describes her migration as 'sudden' and further on she calls it her "final relocation" ("Today is precisely five months since the day of my final relocation from Russia"). In her later post she writes:

> It seems I am not coming back any more. It is too short a time to understand whether this new place of living can become a home for you. Could you eventually blend in or will you forever remain a foreigner?

The feeling that their departure from home was to a certain extent forced prompts new Russian emigrants to try to reclaim their agency. As *Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh* puts it, "this is definitely a new chapter that I was forced to start against my will. I am going to overtake its further authorship, however". Emigrants tried to recover their agency by choosing a destination country (or countries). But the expedited nature of migration has significantly limited the emigrants' selection of destinations. With an increasing number of countries tightening their borders for Russian passport holders, visa-free entry has emerged as one of the primary — if not the most important — criterion of determining their destination choices. Yet, reclaiming agency in choosing a destination does not necessarily entail success in setting up a new home.

---

[10] *Alyona v poiskhakh doma* describes the feeling of "losing some cornerstone, some things that were milestones in my life, larger than daily purchases and small errands. Something that was meaningful". *Or vovnutr* follows a similar line of thought: "This is not Motherland, of course, there can be only one Motherland. The Motherland is no more. This is, however, a very pleasant 'guest stay'['vgosti' — E. P. & A. M.]".

The concept of home as something stable and given, which has now been lost, co-exists in the emigrants' narratives with the concept of home as a practice. The "home" can be created through certain performative actions and symbols. *Emigrantka s detmi* mentions that after she brought her dog to Montenegro, it felt like they got to a "new level": "we are, like, no longer refugees, we are settling down, we have a dog!" In another post she tells the story of buying "grain jars" in Montenegro: "For me these are more than just jars, than just cereals, it is a symbol".

The channel *Or vovnutr* connects the feeling of home with the sensations of "meaningfulness" and "togetherness":

> [I was] doing an incredible amount of household chores. [I] moved furniture, sorted things out of the remaining boxes, bought light bulbs. [I] got a huge feeling of life's meaningfulness. For me it is a "long way to come home", where "home" is a meaningful togetherness of me and life.

Personal space that the emigrants try to make home with varying success is still dependent on their own efforts. Relations with people around them, however, that are structured by divisions described above require cooperation and good will from others. In the emigrants' narratives the us/them divide goes in two ways: between "those who have left" (*uekhavshiye*) and "those who have stayed" (*ostavshiyesya*) and between the immigrants and the locals.

The former relationship is fraught with a multitude of conflicting emotions. According to the narrators' testimonies, individuals who have left their homes face a lack of understanding and, at times, overtly hostile reactions from their friends, relatives, and acquaintances who remain behind. As *Emigrantka s detmi* describes it:

> …somebody's departure is perceived by many from their circle as a loss. I heard words like "betrayal" and "leaving in distress". Even if this person is not someone you are close to.

The narrators also mention having online confrontations with those who have stayed in Russia, being accused of betrayal. One narrator describes an interaction she had with a commentator to her blog:

> You can now congratulate me: yesterday the channel "Emigrantka s detmi" got its first comment of the kind "You've left so now just shut up". As far as I understand, this is precisely the reason why people leave — because they don't want to keep silent, but vigilant citizens (the commentator described herself as "a contented housewife") waylay them even in their emigrants' dens and order them to shut up.

In this instance, the narrator is faced with the argument that her decision to leave has stripped her of the right to express her opinions about what is happening in Russia. *Pereselenets-Serbia* reports his bewilderment at the responses he gets from acquaintances in Russia: they seem to be content with their lives and demonstrate indifference and lack of concern about innocent people being killed or the loss of their freedom of speech or freedom of assembly. He con-

cludes by saying: "it turned out that many of those whom I considered passionarians[11] are quite happy with the role of a canary in a gilded cage".

Sometimes the newly arrived migrants describe themselves as sandwiched between those who remained behind and emigrants of the previous waves. In other words, most of the "battles" are fought online with their compatriots (or former compatriots) on both sides of the border while the lives of the local communities are running in parallel, as if at a certain distance from the emigrants' lives.

Although the host communities are also considered as "others," the narrators' feelings about the hosts are much less conflicting. This can hardly seem surprising given that throughout their first year abroad, by their own accounts, the emigrants' interactions with the locals are typically limited to simple exchanges in shops, cafés and banks, government offices, etc. Children provide an important stimulus for integration, however, and serve as a point of entry into the local community: the two narrators with school-age children (*Emigrantka s detmi* and *Alyona v poiskakh doma*) give detailed accounts of their efforts to communicate with other parents and teachers, going to parents' meetings, birthday parties and so on.

The narrators generally express positive views about life in the host country (or countries) and tend to view the daily challenges they encounter as a 'quest' rather than frustrating or disturbing experience: "Everything that is happening is a non-linear quest for leaving my comfort zone, and what's more, you are not quite sure where in this quest you need to be going right now" (*Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh*). A similar comparison is made by the channel *Or vovnutr*. For her, however, the "quests" inherent in the emigrant life in the host country are part of her adaptation struggles:

> …what used to be just one of the items in your to-do list has now turned into a separate quest. Where do I find an ophthalmologist? How do I find a repairman to fix the shower handle? … You feel small and helpless, the country around overwhelming and incomprehensible, the language immense and complex.

Language is presented as a significant contributor to the profound sense of uncertainty and disorientation that emigrants experience. One author reflects on this by stating:

> Emigration also makes you accustomed to a constant state of not understanding. I've come to accept and embrace the fact that when I go to the post office, I'll be lucky to grasp even a quarter of what the lady who can't locate my parcel tells me. And if I manage to formulate a response, that would be a stroke of good fortune (*Or vovnutr*).

In their small stories, even those narrators who don't explicitly mention taking language classes or self-study meticulously describe moments that show their

---

[11] Here the narrator evokes a concept introduced by a Soviet-era philosopher and historian Lev Gumilev: A "passionarian" is an individual characterized by an exceptional capacity and desire to exert extraordinary effort to effect changes in their environment. Such individuals are believed to possess an abundance of vital energy that can be channeled into both creative and potentially destructive actions.

language acquisition progress such as ordering coffee without resorting to English, being able to read handwritten notes on shop doors, scheduling appointments, etc. The process of learning unfolds through small discoveries and comparisons they make along the way. While Russia is seen as more and more hostile and menacing the current location, on the contrary, transforms from frightening and confusing into more and more safe and welcoming. During her brief visit to Moscow, this is how *@lalalanam* describes her feelings for Belgrade:

> I miss Belgrade. I spent three months there and I got my favorite spots, favorite food, streets which I enjoyed walking along, my points of reference… I didn't like Belgrade at first, in the first month I thought this city is perfect only for losing one's mind or getting stoned, for everything else it's bad. I spent the whole March rushing back and forth across Belgrade under the rain and wind between some bank, post and police offices, and on the way I just had enough time to notice the graffiti sending threats to Americans on the shabby looking walls and to think "what a nightmare". And the second month I was already passing these walls and thought "Oh, it says 'Fuck Nato', it means there's just a block to go to that shoe shop, why I've been afraid of this graffiti".

Another narrator describes her adaptation process the following way:

> Adaptation comes over you unnoticeably. You stop looking at your watch thinking that "in Moscow it's one hour earlier". You stop calculating prices in rubles. Then you stop comparing prices at all. You stop remembering what else in your country has been banned, closed or opened. "Us" — it is here now (*Or vovnutr*).

Alyona v poiskhakh doma describes her efforts to settle in Turkey:

> The most complicated process for me is not the red tape or dealing with some everyday tasks, etc., but accepting the place with my heart and mind. Accepting this place as my own. It happens through every contact. It is not always easy but it happens every time.

But the efforts to fit into the new surroundings are not the same as finding new forms of belonging: "once again I acknowledge that you can't stop being an emigrant regardless of the number of years or the number of words learnt" (*Alyona v poiskhakh doma*). Moreover, it becomes clear that the identity is not decided by self-identification or self-appellation, or even residence. It is decided by those who are around you and depends on how they choose to see you and what status they are willing to grant you. *Or vovnutr* observes:

> Emigration is an excellent way to help you discard your illusions that there is anything permanent. Everything that you have is temporary, perishable: residence permit, car number, ID, housing, foreign passport… It is hard to grasp the idea how many things in your life that you assume are permanent in fact are not once you cross the borders of your country of citizenship.

In their Telegram accounts, our narrators express a positive attitude to building a new home and eagerness to fit in. Practical obstacles on the way to settling down, bureaucratic hurdles to gaining new status are regarded as "quest" and adventure. Through small steps in their small stories, Russian emigrants gradually

discover that their adaptation "comes over you unnoticeably". Yet, the lines of divisions that they brought with them — between pro-war and anti-war, between "leavers" and "remainers" — persist and obstruct the integration in host communities. Russian emigrants' belonging is still too much tied to Russian affairs. It should be noted that the period covered in this study is relatively short, with most emigrants spending less than a year in their host country. For those who arrived late or moved between multiple countries, the duration is even shorter. Therefore, it is not surprising that their relationship with the host communities tended to be rather superficial and their understanding of the host country's culture limited, particularly due to the language barrier. It should also be highlighted that these narrators are "ordinary" Russians who did not have previously developed international networks to rely on in their emigration or the social capital needed to establish new cross-national cooperation.

Conclusion

In their Telegram channels, Russian emigrants use storytelling to maintain the connection with their homeland and at the same time to navigate the challenges stemming from their sudden departure. Telegram's versatile and interactive communication capabilities allow the narrators to actively engage with their audiences. Within these digital narratives, the narrators intricately weave together personal and public elements, creating fragmented and polyphonic accounts of their experiences. These narratives provide a platform for them to explore their evolving identities in their new host countries. Most of the authors, however, remain uncertain about both their status in the host countries and the notions of delocalized cosmopolitan/nomadic identities as Russia remains central in their narratives, providing a consistent point of reference.

Their enduring connection to Russia prompts the emigrants to address a complicated issue of belonging. They carry a profound sense of shame for the invasion and the actions of their fellow countrymen. Although they stay engaged with Russian news and political discourse, their choice to leave signifies an attempt to separate their personal identities from their national identity, to distance themselves from the actions of the state.

The question of returning to Russia is tightly bound to the narrators' ambivalent sentiments regarding Russia's dual role as both a cherished home and an aggressive state. As they contemplate the idea of returning, they grapple with the harsh truth that the normalization of the war in Russia is just as troubling as the initial invasion, making their return increasingly unlikely.

The overarching theme of "lost home" coexists with their pursuit of a new home in the host countries, which they depict as adventurous quests and exciting plot twists in their personal stories. While they embrace the challenge of adaptation, their relationships with the host communities tend to remain superficial due to their relatively short time spent abroad and the language barriers that limit their understanding of local culture. Consequently, their accounts largely revolve

around humorous anecdotes about encounters with local bureaucracy, minor miscommunications, and unexpected discoveries about daily life in their host countries. Thus, ethical divisions and resulting relocation, which caused major disruptions in their lives, are downplayed by the emigrants in their small stories but these small stories, nevertheless, reflect the importance of moral integrity despite the apparent costs.

REFERENCES

Bamberg Michael. "Talk, Small Stories, and Adolescent Identities". *Human Development* 47(6) (2004): 366–69.

Banulescu-Bogdan Natalia, Haim Malka, Culbertson Shelly. *How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power*. Migration Policy Institute, 2021. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/narratives-about-migration-2021_final.pdf

Boccagni Paolo. "The Framing of Return from Above and Below in Ecuadorian Migration: A Project, a Myth, or a Political Device?" *Global Networks* 11 (2011): 461–480.

Bonifazi Corrado, Paparusso Angela. "Remain or Return Home: The Migration Intentions of First-Generation Migrants in Italy". *Population, Space & Place* 25(2) (2019). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/psp.2174

Cakmak Mustafa. "Take Me Back to My Homeland Dead or Alive!": — 6 (2021). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.630558/full

Carling Jørgen, Bolognani Marta, Bivand Erdal; Rojan Tordhol Ezzati; Ceri Oeppen; Erlend Paasche; Silje Vatne Pettersen & Tove Heggli Sagmo. *Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration. PRIO Project Summary*. Oslo: PRIO, 2015.

Christou Anastasia. *Narratives of Place, Culture and Identity. Second-Generation Greek-Americans Return "Home"*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

Dayter Daria, Muhleisen Susanne. "Telling Stories about Self in Digital Contexts: Same, Same, but Different?" *Open Linguistics* 2 (2016): 572–576.

Diehl Claudia, Liebau Elisabeth. *Turning Back to Turkey — or Turning the Back to Germany? Remigration Intentions and Behavior of Turkish Immigrants in Germany between 1984 and 2011*. SOEPpapers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research 637, DIW Berlin, The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP): 2014.

Eastmond Marita. "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2) (2007): 248–264.

Eastmond Marita. "Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina". *International Migration* 44(3) (2006): 141–166.

Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. "Small Stories Research". De Fina A., Georgakopoulou (Eds.) *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. Wiley Blackwell, 2015: 255–273.

Georgakopoulou Alexandra. "Co-Opting Small Stories on Social Media: A Narrative Analysis of the Directive of Authenticity". *Poetics Today* 43(2) (2022): 265–286.

Gizitdinov Nariman, Bedwell Helena. (October 2022). "More Russians flee than join Putin's army after war call-up". *Bloomberg* (October 2022). https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-04/more-russians-flee-than-join-putin-s-army-after-call-up-for-war

Heyd Theresa. "Narratives of Belonging in the Digital Diaspora: Corpus Approaches to a Cultural Concept". *Open Linguistics* 2(1) (2016). https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opli-2016-0013/html

Ibarra Herminia, Barbulescu Roxana. "Identity as Narrative: Prevalence, Effectiveness, and Consequences of Narrative Identity Work in Macro Work Role Transitions". *The Academy of Management* Review 35(1) (2010): 135–154.

Kostenko Nika, Zavadskaya Margarita, Kamalov Emil, Sergeeva Ivetta. "The Russian Rhizome: A Social Portrait of New Immigrants". *Re:Russia* (11.01.2023). https://re-russia.net/en/%20expertise/045/

Massey Doreen. “A Global Sense of Place”. Oakes T., Price P.L. (Eds.) *The Cultural Geography Reader*. Routledge, 2008: 257–264.

McAdams Dan. “The Psychological Self as Actor, Agent, and Author. Perspectives on Psychological Science” 8(3) (2013): 272–295.

Petrou Kirstie, Connell John. “Food, Morality and Identity: Mobility, Remittances and the Translocal Community in Paama, Vanuatu”. *Australian Geographer* 48(2) (2017): 219–234.

Ralph David, Staeheli Lynn A. “Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities”. *Geography Compass* 5 (2011): 517–530.

Re:Russia (a). In Russia, “Telegram has become the primary Internet platform for young people, surpassing YouTube in reach and WhatsApp in average daily user time”. (12.05.2023). https://re-russia.net/en/review/263/

Re:Russia (b). Escape from War: New data puts the number of Russians who have left at more than 800,000 people. (28.07.2023) https://re-russia.net/en/review/347/

Sahin-Mencutek Zeynep. “Migration Narrative in Policy and Politics”. *Working Paper* 17 (2020). Ryerson University: 2020. https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/centre-for-immigration-and-settlement/tmcis/publications/workingpapers/2020_17_Sahin_Mencutek_Zeynep_Migration_Narratives_in_Policy_and_Politics.pdf

West Laura. “Facebook Sharing: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Computer-Mediated Storytelling”. *Discourse, Context & Media* 2(1) (2013): 1–13.

Демидкина Ксения. «Аудитория русскоязычных каналов в Telegram выросла вдвое за 2022 год». *Forbes* (20.01.2023). https://www.forbes.ru/svoi-biznes/483954-auditoria-russkoazycnyh-kanalov-v-telegram-vyrosla-vdvoe-za-2022-god

Камалов Эмиль, Сергеева Иветта, Костенко Вероника, Завадская Маргарита. Большой исход: портрет новых мигрантов из России. Отчет по результатам опроса в марте 2022 проекта OutRush. (2022). htpps:// https://outrush.io/report_march_2022

Левонтина Ирина, Шмелева Елена. «Зэтники и нетвойняшки. Каким стал специальный военный русский язык». *Carnegie Politika* (2023). https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89259

Meduza Подкасты. Сотни тысяч людей уехали из России из-за войны и репрессий. Но многие из них упорно продолжают называть эмиграцию «релокацией». Почему? (31.01.2023) https://meduza.io/episodes/2023/01/31/sotni-tysyach-lyudey-uehali-iz-rossii-iz-za-voyny-i-repressiy-no-mnogie-iz-nih-uporno-prodolzhayut-nazyvat-emigratsiyu-relokatsiey-pochemu

Палоши Ильдико. ««Понаехавшая»: победа коннотативного значения». Л. В.Рацибурская (ред.). *Национальные коды в языке и литературе. Язык как культурно-историческое достояние народа*. Нижний Новгород: Изд-во ННГУ им. Н. И. Лобачевского, 2020: 118–123.

Радио Свобода. «Это как похороны». Россияне — о своем бегстве из страны (29.09.2022). https://www.svoboda.org/amp/eto-kak-pohorony-rossiyane-o-svoem-begstve-iz-strany/32055550.html

Селизарова Варвара. «Куда уехали россияне из-за частичной мобилизации и что планируют делать дальше». *Forbes* (октябрь 2022). https://www.forbes.ru/svoi-biznes/478891-kuda-uehali-rossiane-iz-za-casticnoj-mobilizacii-i-cto-planiruut-delat-dal-se

Сигнал. «Релокация» (2022). https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=ff4a009ba1f59d865f0301f85&id=830b500609

Demidkina Ksenija. «Auditorija russkojazychnyh kanalov v Telegram vyrosla vdvoe za 2022 god». Forbes (20.01.2023). https://www.forbes.ru/svoi-biznes/483954-auditoria-russkoazycnyh-kanalov-v-telegram-vyrosla-vdvoe-za-2022-god

Kamalov Emil, Sergeeva Ivetta, Kostenko Veronika, Zavadskaja Margarita. 2022. Bol’shoj ishod: portret novyh migrantov iz Rossii. Otchet po rezul’tatam oprosa v marte 2022 proekta OutRush. (2022). htpps:// https://outrush.io/report_march_2022

Levontina Irina, Shmeleva Elena. «Zjetniki i netvojnjashki. Kakim stal special’nyj voennyj russkij jazyk». Carnegie Politika (2023). https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89259

Meduza Podkasty. Sotni tysjach ljudej uehali iz Rossii iz-za vojny i repressij. No mnogie iz nih uporno prodolzhajut nazyvat' jemigraciju «relokaciej». Pochemu? (31.01.2023) https://meduza.io/episodes/2023/01/31/sotni-tysyach-lyudey-uehali-iz-rossii-iz-za-voyny-i-repressiy-no-mnogie-iz-nih-uporno-prodolzhayut-nazyvat-emigratsiyu-relokatsiey-pochemu

Palosi Ildiko. ««Ponaehavshaja»: pobeda konnotativnogo znachenija». L.V.Raciburskaja (Ed.). *Nacional'nye kody v jazyke i literature. Jazyk kak kul'turno-istoricheskoe dostojanie naroda.* Nizhni Novgorod: Publishing House of the National Research State University of Nizhny Novgorod named after N.I. Lobachevsky, 2020: 118–123.

Radio Svoboda. «Jeto kak pohorony». Rossijane — o svoem begstve iz strany (29.09.2022). https://www.svoboda.org/amp/eto-kak-pohorony-rossiyane-o-svoem-begstve-iz-strany/32055550.html

Selizarova Varvara. «Kuda uehali rossijane iz-za chastichnoj mobilizacii i chto planirujut delat' dal'she». *Forbes* (October 2022). https://www.forbes.ru/svoi-biznes/478891-kuda-uehali-rossiane-iz-za-casticnoj-mobilizacii-i-cto-planiruut-delat-dal-se

Signal. «Relokacija» (2022). https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=ff4a009ba1f59d865f0301f85&id=830b500609

Appendix

DESCRIPTION OF TELEGRAM CHANNELS

Channel name	Date of channel creation	Bio	Date of emigration	Host country (or countries)	Narrator
Emigrantka s detmi, @russianmigrant (Emigrant with kids)	04.11.2022	Electric valenok Now: Montenegro #notowar	November 2022	Montenegro	Middle-aged woman with children, married, relocated from Moscow
Pereselenets — Serbia, @greatmig (Resettler – Serbia)	29.09.2022	Practical advice, useful links and real-time diary of a migrant	September 2022	Serbia	Middle-aged man, married, profession not specified, relocated from Ekaterinburg
Lalalanam @lalalanam	25.02.2022	Sveta T	March 2022	Serbia	Young woman, single, product manager, relocated from Moscow
Alena v poiskakh doma @alenaislookingforahome	16.04.2022	Hi! My name is Alyona and on 24 February I, like many others, lost home. No, I am not from Ukraine and physically my country is intact. But for me Russia has become a place I won't be able to come back to. And this is the diary of my migration!	April 2022	Turkey	Middle-aged woman, divorced, with a school-age daughter, profession not specified, relocated from Moscow.
Or vovnutr, https://t.me/screaminsideofme (Screaming inside of me)	4.02.2022	Memistress in exile Heart of art and text soul	April 2022	Montenegro	Young woman, single, employed in the gaming industry; relocated from Moscow.
Moshka na argentinskikh beregakh https://t.me/julxenishere (Fly on the Argentinian shores)	11.03.2022	–	March 2020	Armenia, Serbia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Argentina	Young woman, in a relationship (later — married), gave birth to a child in Argentina; employed in adult education; relocated from St.Petersburg

Јекатерина Пургина, Андреј Мењшиков

ДИГИТАЛНИ НАРАТИВИ НОВИХ РУСКИХ ЕМИГРАНАТА: ПРЕГОВАРАЊА ИДЕНТИТЕТА ПРЕКО ГРАНИЦА

Резиме

Процењује се да је између 820.000 и 920.000 грађана емигрирало из Русије од фебруара 2022. године, а многи од њих окренули су се друштвеним мрежама, посебно „Телеграму“, тражећи нецензурисане информације и мреже подршке. Циљ овог рада јесте да анализира како руски емигранти граде своје идентитете кроз дигиталну нарацију. Њихови дигитални наративи су полифони, фрагментарни и са отвореним крајем; дозвољавају емигрантима да експериментишу са својим идентитетима у новој средини, борећи са сметњама изазваним њиховим изненадним одласком. Овај рад такође испитује концепте које емигранти користе да опишу свој статус, укључујући „избеглице“ и „релоканте“. Како могућност повратка старом животу све више бледи, концепт дома подлеже променама у наративима емиграната. Ипак, интеграција емиграната у локалне заједнице је под утицајем трајних подела које потичу још из њихове домовине (између оних који су проратни и антиратни, између „оних који одлазе“ и „оних који остају“).

Кључне речи: дигитални наративи, руски емигранти, анализа наратива, дом, идентитет.