Political Geography 124 (2026) 103436

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Full Length Article

Reclaiming sovereignty over the body: Post-2022 Russian migration between bio-, thanato- and necropolitics

Tomasz Rawski [a,*], Zuzanna Bogumił [b], Katarzyna Roman-Rawska [c]

[a] The Faculty of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, Poland
[b] The Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw, Poland
[c] The Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Migration
Russia
Military mobilization
War in Ukraine
Biopolitics
Thanatopolitics
Necropolitics
Assemblage
Aleatory sovereignty

ABSTRACT

This article examines the lived migratory experience of Russian citizens who have left their country after Vladimir Putin's announcement of the partial mobilisation of military reservists on September 21, 2022. By using the 'assemblage approach' to migration, and the concept of 'aleatory sovereignty,' both embedded in Michel Foucault's reflection on bio-/thanato-politics and Achille Mbembe's reflection on necropolitics, this article discusses post-2022 Russian migration as a process of migrants reclaiming sovereignty over their own bodies. More precisely, we reconstruct three main dimensions of this migratory experience. We scrutinize how they resisted and challenged the Russian bio-/thanato-political regime, sliding into necropolitics, by taking the decision to leave; we analyse how they regained sovereign power over their bodies by starting their migration route and remaining on it for some time; we examine how they renegotiated their aleatory sovereignty in various new settings by examining their ways of adaptation in different host countries, i.e. new biopolitical regimes.

1. Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 opened a biopolitical Pandora's box. One of its most important, large-scale manifestations was the partial mobilisation of military reservists announced by Vladimir Putin on September 21, 2022. This mobilisation was implemented not only to support professional Russian soldiers on the frontline in eastern Ukraine, but also, if not above all, to discipline the Russian population and demonstrate the state's power over the life and death of its citizens. Mass military mobilisation is a classic bio-/thanato-political tool used by the sovereign since the beginning of modernity. Nevertheless, in times of military privatisation (Baggiarini, 2014), hybrid citizenship (Bondy, 2015), and liquid societies (Priban, 2007), its disciplinary power transmutes. Its limitations are particularly visible when one focuses on people who have objected to being subject to such mobilisation by emigrating from their own country.

Chronologically, these individuals constitute the second major wave of war migration of RF citizens, which started around September 21, 2022 and peaked over the next two to three weeks. It followed the first wave, which took place immediately after February 24, 2022 and lasted about the same amount of time. While the first wave has already been partly researched and described (Korobkov et al., 2022; Melkumyan & Melkonyan, 2023; Mühlfried, 2023; Rapoport, 2023), the second one is still very much 'terra incognita' to be explored.

Thus, the main aim of this article is to take a step towards exploring it. We examine the lived experiences of Russians who perceived the announcement of the partial military mobilization as a turning point in Putin's regime from biopolitical governance to thanatopolitical control over their bodies. These individuals feared becoming subjects of thanatopolitics: being forcibly sent to the frontlines and having their lives instrumentalized within the necropolitical logic of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In response, they chose to migrate from Russia, this being an effort to reclaim sovereignty over their own bodies. In the article, we follow and reconstruct the migrants' bodily responses to the mobilisation while still at home; we scrutinize how they challenged the Russian bio-/thanato-political regime, by taking the decision to leave, and regained control over their bodies by starting their migration route and remaining on it for some time; and we examine their attempts and ways of adaptation in different new biopolitical regimes, i.e. host countries.

This article is situated within ongoing academic discussions on the biopolitics of Putin's regime (Makarychev, 2018; Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018b), and the biopolitics of migration (Aradau & Tazzioli, 2019). It also responds to the most recent call for more critical and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: t.rawski@is.uw.edu.pl (T. Rawski).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2025.103436
Received 2 December 2024; Received in revised form 31 July 2025; Accepted 24 October 2025

methodologically rigorous application of biopolitical and necropolitical theories in scholarly research (Peters et al., 2025). Therefore, in our analysis of Russian post-mobilization migration, we carefully distinguish between biopolitics, thanatopolitics, and necropolitics. While these forms of power often operate simultaneously and in complementary ways, we emphasize their distinct logics and effects in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of their dynamics in the Russian context. Importantly, our final conceptualization of these terms emerges from both rigorous theoretical reflection and the grassroots perspectives of our interlocutors, particularly in how they described the changes in the politics in Russia between February and September 2022. Moreover, unlike most existing literature which focuses on how life became a target of Putin's bio/thanato-political infrastructure of state power, this article applies the assemblage approach (Wiertz, 2020) in order to discuss the agency of people. More precisely, we discuss how partial military mobilisation, by exposing many Russian citizens to Putin's thanatopolitics, pushed some of them to do the exact opposite of what was expected from them: to resist Putin's bio-/thanato-political regime, regain sovereign power over their own bodies and renegotiate their aleatory sovereignty in various new settings.

This article is structured as follows. In Section 1, we explain our theoretical position by embedding the 'assemblage approach' to migration, and the concept of 'aleatory sovereignty,' in Michel Foucault's (1978, 2003) reflection on bio-/thanato-politics and Achille Mbembe's (2019) reflection on necropolitics. Whereas both concepts emerge from distinct theoretical lineages, they offer critically sensitive tools for grasping the complexity of power relations that shape and organise migrants' lives. The 'assemblage approach' was developed by Thilo Wiertz (2020) and inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatari (1987) and Deleuze (1992), while 'aleatory sovereignty' was developed by Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Jason Cons (Dunn & Cons, 2014). This approach is especially valuable in the analysis of Russian migrants, who, as citizens of an imperial power, historically held a position of relative privilege in comparison to their neighbouring societies. Next, in Section 2, we present the methodology of our research. Then, in Sections 3-5, we scrutinize the experience of post-mobilisation Russian migrants in three stages. Section 3 discusses the experience of being trapped within the Russian biopolitical regime, the intensifying sense of a shift toward thanatopolitics, and the fear of becoming an instrument of necropolitics: factors that ultimately shaped the decision-making process behind leaving the country. Section 4 discusses existing in-between biopolitical regimes, which was experienced by all of our interlocutors, albeit to varying extents. This experience of (re)gaining subjectivity, agency and control over one's body was usually accompanied by instability, uncertainty and a sense of being uprooted. Section 5 discusses various experiences of trying to settle down in different host countries. Here we look at migrants' strategies of joining new, more or less friendly, biopolitical regimes: how they negotiate the extent of their freshly gained subjectivities while trying to maximise their participation in the privileges offered by these biopolitical regimes and minimise exposure to their negative actions.

2. Russian post-mobilisation migration between bio-/thanato- and necropolitics

The 'assemblage approach' to migration is particularly useful because it modifies the traditional, Foucauldian and Mbembian, understanding of bio-/thanato-/necropolitics in several fundamental respects. Most importantly, it pays attention to the fact that the experience of biopolitics is not static, binary and hardly changeable. On the contrary, it is rather a multiple and constant process of becoming modulated by the micropolitics of specific situations. Similarly, biopolitical regimes are not a result of the agency of only one hegemonic institution, the state, but emerge as a result of actions of numerous actors and institutions shaped by different and sometimes contradictory rationales (Wiertz, 2020).

Bio-, thanato- and necropolitics are three different ways of producing human bodies which provide a macro-structural context for our study and help understanding the Russian regime's actions in Ukraine as push factors for the migrations, and the relative biopolitical efficiency of destination regimes as pull factors.

With biopolitics, until the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine, the Russian regime was biopolitical in the classic sense – as a regime oriented towards power over the biological life of the population living on its state territories. This idea, formulated originally by Michel Foucault as "bringing life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault, 1978, p. 143) primarily for its own benefit, was applied to Putinist Russia by Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017a; Makarychev, 2022). These authors claimed this process was visible in domestic politics and the extension of state sovereignty over the private lives of citizens (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018a). Other authors observed biopolitics in Russia in restrictions imposed on citizens' sexual rights (Stella et al., 2015); in the development of social programmes that stressed traditional femininity and masculinity (Kalinina, 2017), and state-controlled reproduction (Naterstad, 2023). All of these changes provoked acute securitisation of ordinary routine social practices (Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015). However, Makarychev and Yatsyk also highlighted that Russia employed biopolitical strategies in its policies toward neighbouring countries in ways that reinforced its geopolitical influence in the region: particularly through managing and instrumentalizing local Russian-speaking populations (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017b, 2018). Thanatopolitics is the inherent reverse of biopolitical power over life: the power to manage death. It can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it is a principle of dividing the lives of the state's own population into those that are worth protecting and reinforcing and those that are not. According to this, less important lives can be either deprived of the regime's attention and abandoned, or precisely identified, subjected to strict control and meticulously separated from the rest of the population. Foucault uses the radical example of racism as the logic of segregating human lives according to skin colour (Foucault, 2003), and the prison as a place of rigorous disciplinary procedures and surveillance, while Giorgio Agamben (1998) uses the example of concentration camp as a particular space where "a state of exception" is applied. Secondly, thanatopolitics is a principle that allows sending some people to death in the name protecting or improving the lives of others. This can be best observed in military conflicts, where one regime mobilizes part of its population to protect the lives of the rest of this population by killing members of other population of an antagonistic regime (Reid, 2008, pp. 74–76). In post-2014 Russia, we could observe how the regime's increasing biopolitical focus on citizens' bodies, linking these with "traditional values", progressing exclusion of successive Russia's minorities from public life and intensifying political repression resulted in a gradual slide of the regime into thanatopolitics. Makarychev (2024) showed how intensive secularising of hygienic discourse and stressing dangers coming from "internal Others" and immigrants to Russia laid the groundwork for the dehumanization of Ukrainians which translated into the necropolitical practices against the latter with the onset of the full-scale invasion.

Importantly, thanatopolitics understood in this way comes very close to necropolitics, defined by Achille Mbembe as the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die (Mbembe, 2019). Both concepts share an active relation to inflicting death, and Mbembe's main example – the African colony as a space of power outside the law – bears a strong resemblance to Agamben's concentration camp. At the same time, there is a significant difference between them. Thanatopolitics operates more often within one population, where it aims at sacrificing life of its part for the sake of enhancing the life of the whole. It means that the primary goal of this death management is still life: "to make live and let die" (Morejón, 2016, p. 556). Necropolitics, on the contrary, reverses these priorities, by making a premature death the primary goal

of life management. In addition, it works more often between populations, which brings spatiality much more to the fore (Peters et al., 2025). With necropolitics, Mbembe's main example is Israel's policy toward Gaza prior to October 7, 2023, which aimed to inflict a slow death on the Palestinians through Israel's meticulous management of the quantity and quality of food products delivered to Gaza, the imposition of bans on basic items necessary for everyday life, deliberately destroying the local healthcare system, etc. Similarly, necropolitics was used in a spatial-geographical context to discuss the lethal violence of the Turkish state against the Kurds (Bargu, 2019); the mass killings of Black youth by the Brazilian state police in Sao Paulo (Alves, 2018); or techniques used by the US government in dealing with prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay camp (Ibrahim & Howarth, 2019). Thus, by waging war in Ukraine, the Russian regime uses thanatopolitics primarily against its own citizens, turning some of them into recruits and soldiers. Then, with their hands, it uses necropolitics primarily against Ukrainians in Ukraine – not only killing the latter directly, but also bombing their critical infrastructure, destroying civilian homes, disrupting food supply chains, and so on – in order to make Ukrainians' everyday life impossible to live.

Admittedly, thanato- and necropolitics are not very often referred to in academic writings about Russia and they are commonly used interchangeably, often lacking critical differentiation. The problem of the applicability of the Foucauldian theory to non-Western societies, particularly the Russian one, was widely discussed in the 1990s (Plamper, 2002; Engelstein, 1993). In this context, Sergiei Prozorov discussed mass terror and *lager* camps of Stalinism as extreme manifestations of the power over life and death (Prozorov, 2013). Another important work, by Katya Tolstaya, showed how extreme dehumanization in the Soviet lager produced *dokhodiagas*, Agamben's paradigmatic bare lives (Tolstaya, 2013). More recently, Tolstaya has broadened her reflections beyond the Gulag by including dehumanization perpetuated by the Putin's regime in Bucha and the war in Ukraine (Tolstaya, 2023). Finally, necropolitics was applied to explain the (in)visibility and exploitation of labour migrants from Central Asia by the Russian state (Round & Irina, 2016).

As mentioned above, in order to go and dynamise and pragmatise this classic logics of bio-/thanato-/necropolitics, we update it with the 'assemblage approach', developed by Thielo Wierz, which brings to the fore "the agency of bodies (…) in the analysis of political processes" (Wiertz, 2020, p. 7). Firstly, Wiertz (2020) advocates seeing power and population processually, as "fields of forces that engender processes of becoming" (Wiertz, 2020, p. 6; after Patton, 2000, p. 55). Secondly, he advocates perceiving population as an internally diverse field of active relations that occur both between individuals and groups, and between different elements of the population and different elements of the bio-/thanato-/necro-political field of power. These relations are important because only through them could particular subjectivities be constituted.

In other words, the 'assemblage approach' is particularly useful for researching the experience of post-mobilisation Russian migration because it introduces variability and bilateralism in power-population relations. This opens up space for analysing different micro-political strategies that migrants take with regards to bio-/thanato-/necro-political regimes they encounter during their experience. Similar attempts have already been made by critical migration researchers, including Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013), Sanyal (2017) and Turner (2016). Among the most recent works, Aradau and Tazzioli (2019) is particularly worth mentioning, since it discusses migration management as a mix of bio-, thanato- and necro-political techniques.

Finally, in order to even better capture the experience of post-mobilisation migration, we use the concept of "aleatory sovereignty", developed to understand how migrants struggle to recreate normal lives on the uneven terrain of host countries. As Dunn and Cons claim, "aleatory sovereignty" means that the sovereignty "is rule by chance—or the constant making and remaking of shifting landscapes of unpredictable power with which both the governed and the governing must contend." (Dunn & Cons, 2014, p. 102). This concept is primarily used to analyse the situation of displaced people in camps and in disputed borderlands (Dunn & Cons, 2014). However, both authors also use this concept in slightly different context when they analyse Russia's regional politics, emphasizing how the orchestration of conflicts in Eurasia creates conditions of aleatory sovereignty—marked by fragmented and unstable authority—which in turn produces a new form of post-Soviet liminality that is central to Russia's geopolitical strategy (Dunn & Bobick, 2014). The concept of "aleatory sovereignty" permits us to show how the sovereignty regained by escaping from mobilisation to various European and Asian countries, was fragile, unpredictable and haphazard. Like Wiertz, Dunn and Cons show that power over one's own life is not given once and for all, but is the result of constant friction over the governance and control of the migrant's body.

3. Methodology

This article is based on the analysis of 163 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participatory observations conducted as part of an international academic project carried out in nine countries to which Russians escaped from war mobilisation: Finland, Estonia, Poland, Serbia, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Mongolia.[1] The research team was composed of the core team located in Warsaw, Poland, and local research partners situated in each of these countries.

At the preparatory stage, we held intensive online team meetings to develop shared interview guidelines and collaboratively establish ethical principles. These were designed to align with the ethical standards of our respective universities and countries, while also adhering to the principles of trauma-informed qualitative research (Alessi & Kahn, 2023). We operated under the assumption that our interviewees could be considered a vulnerable group, given that they left Russia in response to the state-declared military mobilization. Their vulnerability was further heightened by the fact that many had close family members or loved ones who remained in Russia and were potentially at risk of state repression. Moreover, as the war continued throughout the research period—and with political conditions in both Russia and host countries shifting—we recognized that information shared by interviewees, which might appear neutral at the time of the interview, could later become sensitive or even dangerous. We also recognized that the research could evoke emotional or psychological responses in the researchers themselves. Therefore, we organized regular online meetings dedicated to discussing challenging research situations, fostering self-reflection, and promoting self-care practices that are essential in trauma-informed research (Alessi & Kahn, 2023).

Our interview guidelines included three clusters of questions related to: (1) pre-mobilisation life in Russia, (2) responses to the announcement of the mobilisation, decision-making on migration and the experiences of being on the move, (3) adaptation in the host countries, with a special focus on the experience of being subject to local migration policy and the relations with receiving communities. Special attention was paid to achieving high, context-sensitive ethical standards of research, applicable in all countries under study. We have also prepared the information on the context of the research that we gave to our interlocutors. We agreed that we would record their oral agreement to be interviewed instead of asking for their signed consent. Moreover, we developed the rules of archiving the collected materials with a special focus on protecting personal data. As the collection contains very sensitive data, we agreed that it cannot be made available on any open access data-storage platform. This was also demanded by our interlocutors in order to obtain their consent to be interviewed and

[1] This article was funded by the research project: "Crossing borders, building walls. Towards ethnography of Russian war mobilization" (NAWA: project no. BPN/GIN/2022/1/00082/DEC/1).

recorded. Our ethical rules and all documents were assessed by the Ethical Commission of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the host of the project, and the Ethical Commission of the partnership universities. Only after obtaining their written positive assessments, did the fieldwork start.

We recruited respondents mainly through announcements on social media, including Telegram Messenger migrant channels and Facebook public/private migrant groups. This was supplemented by the 'snowball' method and direct live recruitment during participant observations of various events. Since the vast majority of our interviews were conducted face-to-face in the countries of residence of Russian migrants, we paid particular attention to the choice of interview locations. These were always selected by our interlocutors, and we ensured that they were safe and appropriate settings for conducting trauma-informed interviews.

During the fieldwork (April–September 2023), we conducted a total of 163 interviews with the participation of 168 respondents, including 25 interviews in Armenia, 9 in Estonia, 19 in Finland, 19 in Georgia, 24 in Kazakhstan, 19 in Mongolia, 10 in Poland, 15 in Serbia and 23 in Turkey. The average interview length was 74 min. Among our respondents, 128 were men and 40 were women. The average age of the respondents was 32 years. Among them, 126 people (75 %) had higher education; 35 respondents were born in Moscow, 25 in Saint Petersburg, 58 in one of the provincial cities of Russia, 32 in small towns or villages, and 10 outside Russia, but had Russian citizenship. Participant observations were made during the fieldwork in all nine countries. For example, we participated in political protests; visited sites where Russians collect and exchange views (cafés, restaurants, cultural centres, districts, churches, schools); documented anti-war and pro-war graffiti; made ethnographic visits to some border crossings; talked with local inhabitants about their reactions towards Russian migrants and the war in Ukraine, etc.

The interviews themselves provide a unique, complex and rich insight into the diverse experience of the Russian post-mobilisation migrants. Thus, in the following sections, we will present the results of our analysis.

4. Bodies pushed out by the Russian regime

The tightening of the Russian biopolitical regime was experienced by our interlocutors even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, primarily as a growing sense of threat from an increasing centralization of state power and its control over social life: "people got used to living in fear, in the sense that there is a "big brother" constantly watching them" [AM-05; see also: EE-05, TR-02, TR-11]. One of the interlocutors, young female journalist who lived in Ulan-Ude in 2019 and worked for state TV, said that the political pressure on journalists was so great at her workplace that: "in 2019 it was no longer possible to work there." [EE-02].

Nevertheless, only representatives of three segments of society – civil activists, representatives of sexual minorities, and representatives of indigenous peoples – claimed that, in their view, this tightening was in reality a change from a biopolitical regime to a thanato-political one. Two gay men characterised their life in Russia at the time as underground and talked about suffering from a sense of being under constant surveillance [AM-02].[2] Our Buryat interlocutors mentioned that long before the full scale invasion they experienced state attempts to erase Buryat culture, language and identity from social life [MN-08; MN-04]. As one of the respondents, a Buryat in his thirties, summarised: "I saw these changes, how they began to zombify us, they were preparing us for this genocide [i.e. the war in Ukraine]" [MN-02]. A feeling of uncertainty and being at risk if you acted in a manner not accepted by the regime was becoming increasingly omnipresent in social life, as described in detail by many of our respondents.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, called 'a special military operation' by the official propaganda, and explained as a necessary decision undertaken to protect Russians from external enemies and threats, allowed the regime to introduce new disciplinary rules in Russia. Those of our interlocutors who spontaneously attended the anti-war protests during the first days of the war immediately experienced the new security measures in action. Unlike previous civic protests, where the reaction of the police had been moderate and predictable, now the police were brutal and repressive. One of our interlocutors, who took part in a protest, was spotted by the police immediately after he had unfurled a Ukrainian flag with the slogan 'Fuck Putin'. Even a few months later, when he recalled memories of desperately running away from "a hundred OMON-ers in bulletproof vests, prepared to fight dangerous criminals" [AM-03], his bodily reaction was very emotional. Another respondent, a carpenter from Northern Russia reported that he faced two administrative court cases in which his anti-war public statements were interpreted as discrediting the army. He had to pay a fine of 30 000 roubles. As he concluded, "it was a time when words became expensive" [FI-10]. Although he thought that being imprisoned might be a fair form of protest, he nevertheless decided to migrate to Finland. In turn, an IT-worker from Voronezh had initially wanted to stay in Russia and agitate against the war, but it quickly became clear for him that "you can't agitate in public, because you will obviously get hit on the back by a police baton right away" [SR-10]. Finally, one of the female interviewees, an interface designer who used to live in Saint Petersburg, even compared taking part in protests to preparing for war [SR-14].

For many of our respondents, the invasion of Ukraine, was a clear signal that the Russian biopolitical regime transforms into the thanatopolitical one, and therefore, they began to seriously consider leaving the country. Some started to prepare by applying for a foreign passport, collecting the necessary documents and money, checking possible destinations, monitoring changes in international traffic and in the migration policies of neighbouring countries. Their feeling of uncertainty and danger grew, causing increasing tension in the bodies. The carpenter mentioned earlier characterised his life in Russia from February to September 2022 as hell: 'as if my soul had been locked in someone else's body' [FI-10]. However, none of our respondents had left the country at that time. Most of them somehow adapted to the new conditions, living in a parallel reality by following alternative media, which revealed existing dissonances within the functioning of biopolitics (compare Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). People reported not being able to believe that, as stressed by a young lawyer from Moscow: "this [i.e. full-scale invasion] was happening in 21st century Europe" [AM-01], but they still believed that the fighting would be carried out only by professional soldiers. The period between the beginning of invasion in February and the announcement of partial military mobilisation in September may be described as waiting-in-silence, but in great tension, for the next step of the regime. Some thought that a third world war might begin with Russia dropping an atomic bomb on Kiev. As a young female artist from Moscow said: "(…) when Putin said he'd kill everyone with a nuclear bomb, I freaked out … I mean, it was really, like, my mind was going crazy" [KZ-03]. Others were afraid of access to money in the bank accounts being blocked [SR-11], borders being closed, or the announcement of full military mobilisation [KZ-03].

The regime announced the partial military mobilisation at a moment when atomisation and anomie of the Russian society had become an established reality. People tended to function alone, and talk only to very close relatives or friends about their feelings and thoughts. A huge majority of our interlocutors reported having focused mostly on their own survival. Their memories of that time diverge from the parallel assessments made in the Western-oriented media, which presented mobilisation as a violation of an unwritten social contract made between Putin and Russian society (Kolesnikov, 2022). Although the mobilisation

[2] A few months after the announcement of the September mobilisation, Russia officially outlawed LGBT + people, by labelling all their activities as extremist, thus ejecting part of the population out of the 'healthy' social fabric.

was officially presented as a war on the domestic front which may have a decisive impact on the Russo-Ukrainian war (Kolesnikov, 2022), none of our respondents talked about it in such a way. Many people felt they were deprived of power over their own bodies and lives, their human rights were neglected, and they were treated simply as biomass by the regime. The mobilisation increased all these feelings to the extreme. The *povestka*, a formal "call to the army", became a "material dimension of biopolitics" (Wiertz, 2020). The possibility of being called up sparked an existential threat in our interlocutors and ultimately mobilised them to take action.

The majority of our respondents declared that although they somehow expected the mobilisation to be announced, when it finally started, they were completely confused. One of our female respondents who used to live in Buryatia depicted it perfectly: "when the mobilisation began, my husband was at work, I was at home (.) I called him, I said that mobilisation has begun. He said yeah (…) Sometime later he came home and I looked at him and I saw that he was taking it very seriously" [MN-03]. Virtually every respondent talked about confusion, high stress, or even panic. One Buryat, who had completed military service earlier, described it as follows: "I was completely confused. I was very confused. (…) I didn't know what to do" [MN-05]. In turn, a young women from Moscow recalled that the mobilisation was interpreted as a total state of exception, which concerned the core subjectivity of each of the interlocutors individually, even though it concerned them as members of certain social groups [KZ-04]. The awareness that it is precisely you who can be denied political subjectivity, sent to the trenches and forced to kill others – that is, be governed as Agamben's bare life – became the mobilising factor for our interlocutors to regain power over their own sovereignty.

For most of them, the main motivation behind the decision to leave Russia was a fear of being taken to the frontline. In late September, when it became apparent that masses were needed at the front and the state media announced the need for 300 000 conscripts, most respondents considered this to be untrue, as the alternative media reported a figure of 600 0000. One of the interviewees, a young lawyer from Moscow, calculated that his chances of ending up at the front were as high as 15 per cent, which he considered a genuine risk of his body becoming a part of the biomass of frontline bodies. As he put it: "the homeland gave me a motivational kick up the arse," [AM-01] which took him to Armenia.

Taking the decision to leave the country was a process with various options to consider. A young male musician from Moscow thought that, if he was taken to the frontline, he would move away from his companions, drop his weapon, surrender to the Ukrainians and keep fighting on their side [TR-17]. This never happened, however, because he eventually migrated to Turkey. One of our female interlocutors recalled her discussion with her husband: "I said, either you hide in the forest, you go to prison, or we leave. In general, well, you definitely won't go there [i.e. to war]" [MN-03]. This couple left Russia for Mongolia. Some people made their decision alone, while others did it after some discussion with relatives. A young male interlocutor recalled a family meeting: "Parents, sister, brother-in-law, we all gathered at home at night. What should I do?" [MN-05]. The collective decision was that he should leave Russia as quickly as possible.

Most of our interlocutors describe the immediate period after the announcement of the mobilisation in terms of high psychological and physical tension, marked by sleep deprivation, attention deficits and problems with work. Even several months later, when we talked with them about it, sitting together in safe places, their bodily reactions were highly emotional. We interpret the fear of potentially being deprived of civil rights and deployed as tools of Putin's necropolitical warfare as a deeply traumatic experience—rooted not in the actual conscription, but in the real possibility of it. This was particularly visible among interviewees who had previous experience of serving in the Russian army and thus were more vulnerable to being mobilised. Regardless of their age, they all reported that the mobilisation triggered in them a number of stressful bodily associations and immediate urges to leave.

Moreover, mobilisation also awoke traumatic memories from the past, particularly those of Soviet repressions. A 48-year-old respondent originally from Moscow, formally incapacitated for military service, reported that he decided to go to Tbilisi because his country made it clear that it wanted to "feed on the people again, and the history of Russia showed that if this country says so, it means it will" [GE-02]. By saying this, he had in mind family memories of the fear caused by the 1937 Stalinist repressions. Memories of Soviet repressions were regularly recalled by our interlocutors of Buryat origin. One of them said the night of the announcement of mobilisation in Buryatia was immediately called "Saint Bartholomew's Night."[3] [MN-05].

It is significant that not all our interlocutors left Russia after the announcement of mobilisation due to their fear of the frontline. One interviewee reported that his main motivation was the fact that the regime forced him to stop the IVF procedure that he and his wife had been going through for a long time to have a baby. The only feasible way to continue was to migrate to Georgia [GE-01]. This example shows how much the Russian regime started to control citizens' bodies by deciding who has to die and who has a right to reproduction.

An important element in the decision-making was the choice of destination country. There were several factors behind this decision. The most obvious one was the proximity and accessibility of the border with a given country [FI-01, FI-03, KZ-01]. Another factor was having or not having a foreign passport [EE-08, EE-10]. People who did not have one at the time of the announcement of mobilization had a limited choice of destination countries compared to those which allowed them entry on the basis of the national passport, such as Kazakhstan or Armenia [AM-01]. Other factors were family or friendship networks [AM-22, MN-05] or the international branch of work [KZ-05, AM-13, SR-05], ticket price and availability of seats on public transport to a given destination [AM-13, EE-10, FI-03], the possibility of proving anti-Putin activism which permitted application for political asylum [EE-05, FI-14], cultural and linguistic proximity of the host country [EE-04], and more.

5. The agency of bodies on the move

After finally taking the decision to migrate, the respondents usually felt relief and the power to act. Many felt the need to join various, bottom-up alternative social media groups which started randomly appearing – especially on Telegram Messenger – where people spontaneously, generously and with confidence exchanged information on how to leave country, which border to cross, which documents to take [AM-22, EE-01, FI-03, FI-18], and so on. They also started to help each other by, for instance, offering lifts. New fluid and hybrid alternative communities were springing up (Wiertz, 2020), composed of bodies on the move, which became resistant to power that took "life as its object" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). None of our interlocutors perceived mobilisation as an obligation to the state or a privilege to sacrifice their life for the state (Baggiarini, 2014). For all interviewees, the *povestka* functioned as a material manifestation of the regime's transition from biopolitical management to thanatopolitical and necropolitical governance— transforming citizens into expendable bodies within the machinery of war.

Making the decision to leave the country was the first step to liberate oneself from the thanatopolitical regime. The second one was getting on the move, which can be considered a manifestation of "the agency of life" (Wiertz, 2020). An interesting observation recurring in the stories of numerous respondents is that they felt the strongest sense of agency and subjectivity while in a nomadic condition. Paradoxically, the liminal stage of their journey between different regimes gave them the sense of greatest freedom, even though their bodies suffered the hardships of an exhausting journey and they paid the price of physical ailments after

[3] The interlocutor made a comparison to the 16th century massacre of French Protestants by Catholics called the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.

crossing the Russian border. Many respondents described these physical ailments as a sign of regaining life and taking full control of it.

In most of the cases, the tensions associated with the heavy burden of threat from the necropolitical regime culminated in the moment of physical encounter with the representative of the regime at a checkpoint on a state border. Many remember crossing the border in great detail, which shows how emotionally difficult this moment was for them. People made a lot of effort to make their bodies invisible to guards. Two interlocutors, a couple in their early 30s who approached the border with Kazakhstan by car wanted to make their car look as if they were on a normal business trip. That men later recalled: "A military officer asked me: 'Why are you going away?' I said: 'I'm going to meet the film director. I'm a composer'" [KZ-03]. Another respondent, a young cameraman crossed the Russian-Georgian border on foot with minimal equipment packed in a single rucksack to give the impression he was just on a walking tour [AM-03]. Moreover, when he started approaching the Russian border guard, he decided to remove his earrings and wore long sleeves to cover his tattoos. In his opinion, it was risky to show any signs of 'otherness' to the guards, as they might have regarded him as suspicious and forced to go back to Russia. Nevertheless, one fragment of the respondent's body displaying a tattoo of the Statue of Liberty aroused the interest of the guards. However, after ironically asking him whether the drawing on his body meant that he liked freedom, they eventually let him through: "He said: what kind of tattoo is that? I said: well, a freedom tattoo. Then he said, like: oh, you like freedom? I don't remember what I responded, but I was really angry, and decided to be rude to him. And I guess that actually bought him off" [AM-03].

Some people felt great emotional tension throughout their stay in the zones between borders. Two interlocutors who took a flight from Moscow to Yerevan, while on board, felt constant fear that the plane could be forced to return to Russia or even make an emergency landing – as was the case of 2021 Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius that was forced by Belarusian authorities to land in Minsk because it had a Belarusian oppositionist on board [AM-01]. Many other respondents felt relief immediately after crossing the checkpoint of the Russian border. As a twenty-years-old woman stressed: "when we crossed the Russian border and already went to the Mongolian border guards, we became calm" [MN-01]; in turn a forty-years-old IT-worker recalled: "right after crossing the border, much of the tension, certainly, went away" [PL-01]; and an office-worker in his mid-30s emphasized: "when this lovely girl at passport control handed me my passport and pointed me to the other side [of the border], I felt a great relief" [SR-09]. Interestingly, for some interlocutors, crossing the border was the first moment they realised they had no clear plan for their onward journey. This is clearly reflected by an IT-respondent in Serbia who first crossed the border with Kazakhstan: "the whole purpose of my journey was to cross the border, and I had no plans for what to do afterwards, […] and I had to decide right at the moment: I have crossed the border, okay, I have to do something now" [SR-06]. This shows that sometimes the respondents remained in a state of high bodily stress, characteristic of the struggle for survival, for a long time and even throughout the entire first stage of migration.

The liberation from the Russian thanatopolitical regime had serious health consequences for many of our interlocutors. We heard stories of how their bodies were released after reaching the first point of their destination abroad. The stories of gay couples [AM-01; AM-02] who felt their bodies were oppressed in Russia because of their sexual orientation and membership of the LGBT + community are particularly interesting. After reaching Armenia, they were ill for two weeks, with high fever, shivers, vomiting and other difficult psychosomatic symptoms. Another respondent, who travelled through the whole of Georgia and northern Armenia, and finally reached Yerevan, said that he slept continuously for the first few days to rest, but also to regain what he called a sense of lightness, release, and recovery of his body [AM-03]. Yet another respondent in Finland described the first period of life abroad, while waiting for the decision on asylum, as a time "as if he had died" [FI-10]. Finally, an engineer from Moscow, who arrived in Turkey, described the initial period after his arrival as a 'spa experience' [GE-01]: a period when his body could finally rest and regenerate after months of being kept in constant tension. As his friends were already there, they all formed a temporary community of similar experience: a time of recovery and peace for the bodies.

Becoming a member of an alternative community is a characteristic feature of the condition of bodies on the move. Our interlocutors talked about temporary support groups they formed while travelling by train, [KZ-04] driving [MN-02, MN-11] or walking to the border [GE-04]. Those who crossed the border with Kazakhstan or Mongolia frequently recalled a similar moment of insecurity, when they discovered that Russian border guards only let migrants enter the passport checkpoint in groups of several people at the same time. For many, suddenly finding themselves in a group of random people caused uncertainty and even fear [MN-01, MN-04, KZ-04]. Some mentioned that they were afraid to enter the checkpoint together with suspicious-looking people so as not to be accidently associated with them and thus be refused permission to leave Russia [KZ-04, MN-04]. In other words, this random border-crossing group became an important, yet ephemeral, community of fate. Those who successfully crossed the border together sometimes continued to travel together for some time [MN-04, KZ-12, KZ-15].

Later, in their first places of destination, strangers self-organised and helped each other, for example, by renting apartments together or living together in spontaneously created shelters, cottages or hotels [AM-08, MN-04, MN-15, TR-02]. This is well illustrated by a respondent who migrated to Mongolia: "Almost instantly, in a day or two, lodging houses were organised. These were just private apartments that enterprising Mongolians … Here I have 10 mattresses, and each of you will be charged 500 rubles. Well, 500 rubles, while the price in a hotel is 2500 rubles – it is five times cheaper, quick and fast" [MN-04] They also exchanged various goods and shared food. Some even organised small detachments to prevent possible conflicts with local communities [MN-04]. Becoming a fully-fledged subject of various temporary groups helped to regain power over one's own subjectivity, as evidenced by a female medical worker in her mid-20s in Kazakhstan: "I am very grateful to the guys who came here before me, and already had experienced all the problems, [because] when I have already arrived, I have not faced the same problems as they did." [KZ-02]. At the same time, it is characteristic that entering any host society and negotiating a new position in it meant the relatively short existence of these alternative collectives.

Finally, some of our interlocutors tried to regain power over their bodies by quickly joining the anti-war protests and pickets in the new countries. One of our respondents in Yerevan, mentioning a picket organised by the newly emerging Russian diaspora, said that, surprisingly for him, the Armenian police officers were not attacking the picketers but guarding them. The fact that they did not threaten the sovereignty of the picketers' bodies in any way helped him to overcome his fear of the open police violence he had brought from Russia [AM-03]. Similar views were repeated by many other interviewees, especially those from Serbia, where Russian citizens quite often organised small protests or pickets in defence of their civil rights [SR-14, SR-12]. However, what was possible in Armenia and Serbia was at the same time not welcome in other host countries. For example, in Mongolia, some Russians who tried to make anti-war picket were asked not to do so because the Mongolian regime was afraid of the reaction of Russian officials [MN-04]. Similarly, in Poland, Russians were not welcomed at anti-war protests, which were dominated by Ukrainians and Poles who denied Russians the right to protest. Thus, bodies liberated from Putin's thanatopolitical regime were quickly becoming objects of new rules and disciplines in host biopolitical regimes.

6. Adaptation(s) of newcomer bodies to host regimes

Some time after reaching destination countries, bodies on the move usually focused on the adaptation process – they started negotiating the

scope of their sovereignty with host regimes. Many Russians escaping from mobilisation to various European and Asian countries quickly realised that their sovereignty is aleatory and may easily be lost (Dunn & Cons, 2014). Our interviews show that the process of grasping this largely depended on the specifics of the migration policies adopted by individual host countries. It is possible to put all nine analysed host regimes on a continuum spanning from very strict to moderately friendly in their attitude towards the Russian migrants. These attitudes were largely shaped in relation to Russian 'neighbourhood imperialism', which consists of Russia simultaneously applying biopolitically inclusive strategies to selected segments of the population of neighbouring countries (especially local Russian minorities) and geopolitical strategies to the authorities of those countries and the rest of their populations (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017b, p. 31). Now we will discuss each end of this continuum in order to show the variety of ways of possible adaptation(s).

Among the most strict regimes, Poland and Estonia serve as the most prominent examples. Both countries set narrow, hard and precise criteria for legitimate access to, and remaining in, their institutional orders. In this way they produced a sharp and hardly transcendable division between bodies inside and outside the system, and reinforced the tendency towards individualisation at the expense of the pursuit of collective organisation. Among the most friendly regimes, there are Serbia and Armenia which offered relatively easy access to the institutions and a relatively broad range of opportunities to legalise residency, and allow various forms of collective association.

In strict regimes, negotiating individual subjectivity was easiest for those Russians who were 'desired' by the regime from the outset by virtue of having a strong document of belonging to the core of the local population: e.g. a Pole's card, Estonian citizenship, and relatively high financial savings. Such a position enabled a comfortable, unhurried adaptation which sometimes was even perceived as happening spontaneously, without any particular effort. As a forty-years-old IT worker stressed: "I cannot say that I have managed to stabilise my life. It has stabilised itself" [PL01].

However, for the majority of respondents settled in strict regimes – those who entered the country on a humanitarian or tourist visa – adaptation became a very difficult experience. The 'undesired' Russians tended to occupy one of two unfavourable structural positions. The first one was a position on the margins of the regime or completely outside of it, which entailed being in a situation of permanent, profound insecurity due to lack of access to legal and institutional protection. Thus, people left on their own had to look for temporary support and stability in informal and usually freshly formed social ties, which made their bodies easy objects of discrimination. A particularly sensitive area was the labour market, where the undesired had access mostly to temporary, grey economy, physical jobs which often remained below their professional qualifications and exhausted their unaccustomed bodies. In the Polish case, firstly, respondents claimed that holding a Russian passport often blocked them from accessing even these grey economy jobs due to the reluctance of both Polish and Ukrainian employers who dominated among the local Russian-speaking community. One of the recurring themes in Polish interviews was a refusal to cooperate with the Russians, formulated by employers regardless of their nationality as follows: "we do not employ people with Russian passports" or "we do not work with Russians" [e.g. PL_02; PL_04].

Secondly, after finding some employment, the undesired Russians usually faced suspicion from supervisors and distancing from colleagues, who subjected their bodies to increased discipline. As one student from the Saint Petersburg emphasized: "(…) the foreman directly said that: but you're a Russian, so I'll throw you out at your first mistake … It was aimed at making me work better" [PL_04]. On the other hand, in extremely difficult situations, our respondents sometimes experienced unexpected solidarity from their colleagues. This was the case of a 49-year-old man from Voronezh who, while working in western Poland, was saved by his Polish colleagues from a construction brigade from his body being severely beaten by the locals: "(…) the locals found out that a Russian lived in that house, and I was caught by Poles and beaten up because I was Russian. They asked me what I was doing here, what I had forgotten and so on. Then I was taken from their hands by my brigade, guys, the Poles saved me back" [PL-02].

Thirdly and finally, the respondents regularly reported not being paid for the work performed: for helping on construction sites, cleaning the office premises, washing the dishes in restaurants, etc. According to them, this was due to the employer's accurate perception that they had no formal possibility to claim their rights due to their functioning on the periphery of the legal system. In short, the main problem of undesired Russians left on their own by the host regime was that their bodies quickly became easy objects of multidimensional discrimination. This has been accurately stated by a creative worker in Poland: "There is a constant tension. It hangs in the air, you know?" [PL-03].

The second, opposite structural position in the strict regime was that of being subject to procedures of increased body surveillance and control by the host country. The respondents from Estonia reconstructed a typical course of institutionalised disciplining of undesired Russians, while revealing a profound intrusion of surveillance into their everyday lives [EE-01]. Disciplinary procedures came in already with the starting of the residence legalisation procedure, which usually took several months. When a migrant had submitted his or her application for temporary residence, he or she had to physically hand over all identity documents to the local migration office in exchange for a temporary Estonian ID-card [EE-01, EE-04, EE-07]. This manoeuvre dragged the Russian body into the system, but again on unfavourable terms.

On the one hand, surrendering the passport not only formally prevented the undesired Russians from leaving Estonia, but also, in practice, restricted their ability to travel around the country and made it difficult to deal with basic living needs, because banks, hotels, shops and other institutions often did not honour the new ID-card as a fully-fledged proof of identity. One respondent, a forty-years-old journalist, compared this situation to that of a homeless person: "you give away your passport, your Russian passport, your foreign passport, your licence, everything, everything. And you're sitting like a bum with no documents" [EE-01]. On the other hand, being formally inside the system meant being subject to constant surveillance: for example, by regular visits of Estonian police in one's place of residence for no particular reason, or meticulous scrutiny by Estonian banks of all expenditure and income flowing into one's local bank accounts: "Every time I buy sausages or milk, they slow my transactions down because they check what kind of milk I bought (….) They say that the state forces them to do this because 'you are a Russian citizen and we don't trust Russian citizens'" [EE-01]. Moreover, part of the process of legalising residency is the obligation to participate in Estonian integration programmes aimed at migrants of different nationalities. In this case, disciplining undesired Russian bodies involved making it difficult for them to acquire the qualifications necessary to adapt smoothly and comfortably to the Estonian reality. Interlocutors reported being arbitrarily moved by local officials to the very end of the waiting list for participation in Estonian language courses [EE-01, EE-04] or, conversely, being directed as the first candidates to poorly paid, manual jobs instead of being given the opportunity of attending training courses [EE-01, EE-09].

Interestingly, although the dominant tension within the Estonian Russian-speaking community was – like in the Polish case – clearly politically motivated, its main axis ran differently. The tension did not arise between the Ukrainian and Russian newcomers, but between two groups of Russian-passport holders: newcomer migrants and local residents living in Estonia since Soviet times. Our interlocutors reported that the essence of the dispute lay in the clash between their own openly anti-war and anti-Putin position and the fundamentally pro-Putin position of many local Russians, the latter rooted in their long experience of being mistreated by the Estonian political elite, who consider them an undesired minority posing a potential threat to Estonian society [EE-05, EE-09, EE-01]. This tension often made it difficult for the newcomers to rent

a flat from local real estate agents. The aforementioned journalist stressed: "When you start trying to rent a flat, Estonians don't want to rent it to you. And the Russians who are here, many of them are in favour of Putin. One Russian estate agent said to me: why aren't you in Russia now, why aren't you fighting for your president? You are a deserter" [EE-01].

In short, in strict regimes, the undesired Russian bodies faced a similar problem of impeded access to the new institutional order in each of two opposing structural positions. They needed to face this problem first in order to start the process of negotiating the scope of individual subjectivity with the regime. Thus, many put efforts into trying to slip into the system 'through the back door' in order to recover a feeling of dignity at least partially and temporarily. Those who managed to slip in, usually did it thanks to a successful appeal to the empathy and goodwill of individual local 'gatekeepers' who decided to make an exception and bend legal procedures in their favour. In this way, some interlocutors could, for example, obtain a PESEL identification number for their bodies at a Polish office despite having no formally registered place of residence [PL_03], or obtain a discount card in an Estonian supermarket despite having no relevant documents [EE_01], or receive medical treatment in a Kazakh hospital despite having no health insurance [KZ_01]. Gaining such small footholds provided them with a small sense of stability and belonging, which was often the beginning of organising a life for oneself in the host regime. In contrast, those who were systematically unsuccessful in their attempts tended to leave their host country after a few weeks or months, only to re-enter a nomadic condition or return to Russia with a sense of failure.

At the same time, the friendly regimes offered much easier access to the system to a much larger number of Russian newcomers. They could enter Serbia for a 30-day stay based only on a foreign Russian passport, while entry and a stay of up to 180 days in post-Soviet Armenia was possible based even on a national Russian passport. These liberal criteria made the process of negotiating subjectivity relatively smooth and peaceful for the vast majority of interlocutors.

The simplest and largely trouble-free method of adaptation in the friendly regimes was the so-called relocation – a collective migration taking place within job responsibilities and organised by the Russian employer as part of moving the headquarters or office of a company out of Russia. Relocation applied particularly to companies of different sizes in the IT sector numbering between a few dozen [SR-06] and several thousand employees [SR-05]. The relocated respondents reported their bodies remaining reasonably calm and relaxed as they resettled and adapted to the new regime along with the entire social micro-world surrounding them most of the time. This means that the relocated bodies either did not step into uncertainty at all or stepped into it only for a very short time. The relocated employees in Armenia and Serbia indicated that the so-called 'relocation package' had played a key role in this process. More precisely, the company provided employees with comprehensive adaptation care from the very beginning, usually free of charge or for a small fee. The services of in-house or local lawyers formed the core of the relocation package, as they dealt not only with the legalisation of the long-term residence of employees, but also provided comprehensive assistance in helping them settle in the new context. This assistance included renting a flat, opening an account at the local bank, and so on. Another important component was psychological support, usually including professional therapeutic counselling and access to pharmacological therapy, which was important to our interlocutors during mental crisis. As a programmer from Moscow emphasized: "it helped to noticeably improve my mood, add strength and mobilise resources to solve local problems" [SR-05]. Yet another component was educational support for employees' children, sometimes even including private care at the workplace, and more often assistance in enrolling a child at a local kindergarten or school.

In short, the relocated Russian benefited from the fact that it was in the company's vital interest to minimise the period of uncertainty and the dimensions of instability in the employee's life. The company ensured that, once relocated to a new place, these people could return as quickly as possible to its usual routine of daily work discipline and productivity, because in this way the company could minimise its financial losses. In other words, employees who don't have to wander around local offices and struggle too much with everyday life problems can devote his or her time to taking care of their bodies and minds in order to generate further profits for the company. We can thus see a bundled transaction here: the company takes a large part of the responsibility for negotiating a favourable structural position for the employee with the new regime so that he or she can perform his or her professional duties quickly and efficiently. Respondents often emphasized that the relocation package made it much easier for them to organise their daily life. It was a case of another IT-worker from Moscow who said: "thanks to this [i.e. relocation package], I don't have as many encounters with state authorities as I could possibly have (…) it would be much harder, of course" [SR-06].

Individual migrations to friendly regimes proved to be more difficult than collective relocations. This contrast was reported directly by an interlocutor in Armenia who observed that the collectively relocated Russians tend to stay in their own social circles and not look for new contacts. As a young student from Moscow claimed: "Yes, they are organised, but I don't go there, because I just don't like it, because they mostly organise some party in a bar when everyone knows each other. And it's just not my thing" [AM-15]. At the same time, the favourable criteria of early access to the system and the relatively wide range of opportunities tended to mobilise individual newcomers to act without so much of a sense of helplessness or disorientation, as in the case of strict regimes. On the one hand, a strong orientation towards adaptive action happened to be a pragmatic way of coping with difficult bodily reactions and emotions, and maintaining psychological stability in the absence of sufficient financial resources to pay for regular professional support. As another young student stressed: "when you're busy doing something, you don't feel fear or anything like that" [SR-04]. On the other hand, vigorous adaptive action was sometimes understood as racing against the clock. The statement of a 30-year-old former journalist living in Serbia showed that feverish attempts to build stability in a new environment can be motivated by a desire to distance oneself from the recurring spectre of a possible return to a nomadic condition: "my main task is to get everything done as quickly as possible (…) now Serbia is supposedly pro-Russian, but who knows what will happen next?" [SR-01].

Interestingly, in friendly regimes, part-functioning in the grey zone was much more often an individual choice than a structural necessity. One of the most popular tactics used by the Russians who wanted to keep their bodies under the radar of the regime for an extended period of time was the mechanism known as a visa run [KZ-17, KZ-18, SR-05, SR-06, SR-09, TR-08]. This involved formally leaving the host country after the permitted period of visa-free stay and crossing the land border with a neighbouring country in order to quickly return to the host country, usually after a few hours [KZ-01, KZ-12, SR-09]. The stamp in the passport obtained in this way documented the re-entry into the country and resulted in the automatic renewal of the visa-free stay period. Thus, a visa run allowed to benefit from being simultaneously inside the system and on the brink of a nomadic condition [EE-10, MN-01, MN-07, SR-11]. This method was used particularly by interlocutors who did not need legal employment in the friendly regime because, for example, they still worked remotely in companies located in Russia. Yet another way to enter the regime unofficially for a longer period of time – which worked in Serbia – was to register a fictitious one-person business [SR-01, SR-07, SR-16]. This move automatically provided a one-year residence permit and has been used, for example, by people hoping for a quick end to the war, which would make it possible for them to return to Russia.

Finally, the liberal migration policies of friendly regimes favoured the collective self-organisation of Russians. This mostly concerned those migrants who had already worked in building civil society in Russia before the invasion and who tried to continue their activities under new

conditions, as depicted by an Armenian respondent: "Russian civil society left Russia, well, it was never really part of Russia, so then it left Russia" [AM-01]. In Armenia, the activist-newcomer community remained quite dispersed and operated in a rather informal mode. For example, by organising grassroots fundraising for refugees from Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh: "We've had a couple of really cool events here put on by Russian guys who helped refugees." [AM-10].

In Serbia, meanwhile, the activists operated more officially, by setting up and registering their own NGOs. One of the most important examples is the openly liberal Russian Democratic Society (RDO) from Belgrade. Their activities included not only anti-regime demonstrations and pickets against the Russian regime, and against the Serbian one when necessary, but also cooperation with Serbian liberal opposition associations and political parties [SR-10, SR-14]. The example of the RDO shows that collective political action is an important dimension of the process of negotiating subjectivity, although at the same time very few regimes allow Russian bodies to openly carry out such activities.

7. Conclusions

This article examined how Russian citizens responded to the post-2022 shift of Vladimir Putin's regime from biopolitical governance to thanatopolitical control (inside Russia) and necropolitical activities (in Ukraine), following the announcement of partial military mobilization in September 2022.

Drawing on 163 interviews with Russian migrants in nine countries—Finland, Estonia, Poland, Serbia, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia—we applied an 'assemblage approach' to analyse their lived experiences of this sharp regime transformation, their motivations behind leaving Russia, and their to reclaim bodily sovereignty while on the move. Moreover, by incorporating the concept of 'aleatory sovereignty', we further demonstrated that the extent to which sovereignty could be regained after reaching destination countries was largely contingent upon its specific migration policies and local political contexts. Our analysis brings three main conclusions.

Firstly, the September 2022 partial military mobilisation was a 'point of no return' for the respondents. The very moment of mobilisation being announced was perceived primarily as an attempt by the Russian authorities to completely take control of citizens' lives in order to then expose their bodies to loss of health or even death on the frontline. This moment activated all the fears, uncertainties and anxieties that the respondents had been gradually accumulating in their daily experience since at least the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February. Deciding to leave the country meant turning these released fears into energy for liberating action. In other words, the mobilisation actually mobilised our respondents to make an anti-war move: leave the Russian regime when it became clear that it had started sliding from Foucauldian biopolitics into thanatopolitics inside Russia and necropolitics in Ukraine.

Secondly, being in a nomadic condition – i.e. outside of any bio-/thanato-/necropolitical regime – was characterized by a fundamental contradiction between a highly enhanced sense of agency and regaining sovereignty over one's own body and life, and the high emotional and health costs generated by the extreme uncertainty and lack of predictability of one's future trajectory. The main way to mitigate this contradiction was the spontaneous formation of alternative communities of mutual support, whose main purpose was to cope with the challenges of nomadic daily life, and whose main outcome was creating new social ties based on the political experience of migration. At this point, Wiertz's assemblages of migrant bodies revealed themselves in their most complete form. However, these alternative communities were usually short-lived and largely disintegrated as the migrants' changed their place of stay or attempted to establish themselves firmly in the host regime.

Thirdly, while the process of negotiating one's own subjectivity with the host regime was a constant and indelible part of any migration experience, it also happened very differently in strict and friendly biopolitical regimes. In the former cases, migrants focused mostly on resisting strong institutional marginalisation and/or disciplining of their bodies, by attempting to combine keeping a low profile in the host society with trying to get inside the system through the back door. Extricating themselves from an initially unfavourable structural position was a lengthy, challenging and largely unpredictable process. Moreover, the subjectivity negotiated at the end of the day usually remained deeply individualised and aleatory, and its scope was rarely satisfactory to our interlocutors. At the same time, this problem was essentially absent in friendly regimes, where the main difference existed between collectively relocated and individual migrants. The bodies of the former remained largely calm and relaxed thanks to the institutional adaptation support provided by their Russian employer and to remaining in familiar social surroundings despite having changed the country of stay. The latter, on the other hand, were more likely to try to organise themselves into various collective bodies, including social and political initiatives of varying degrees of formalisation, through which they waged a collective struggle to stabilise their aleatory subjectivities on a supra-individual level.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tomasz Rawski: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition. **Zuzanna Bogumił:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition. **Katarzyna Roman-Rawska:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all our project partners for their profound research commitment to the study on which this article has been based: Mustafa Berkay Aydın, Mariam Darchiashvili, Olga Davydova-Minguet, Ketevan Gurchiani, Byambabaatar Ichinkhorloo, Alexander Makhov, Nikita Mishakov, Sona Nersisyan, Raili Nugin, Anna Pazio, Tamilla Şahin, Caress Schenk, and Anna Sokolova.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

References

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Alessi, E. J., & Kahn, S. (2023). Toward a trauma-informed qualitative research approach: Guidelines for ensuring the safety and promoting the resilience of research participants. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 20*(1), 121–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2022.2107967

Alves, J. A. (2018). *The anti-black city: Police terror and black urban life in Brazil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnessota Press.

Aradau, C., & Tazzioli, M. (2019). Biopolitics multiple: Migration, extraction, subtraction. *Millennium, 48*(2), 198–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819889139

Baggiarini, B. (2014). Remaking soldier-citizens: Military privatization and the biopolitics of sacrifice. *St Antony's International Review, 9*(2), 9–23.

Bargu, B. (2019). *Turkey's necropolitical laboratory: Democracy, violence and resistance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bondy, J. M. (2015). Hybrid citizenship: Latina youth and the politics of belonging. *High School Journal, 98*(4), 353–373. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44077796.
Deleuze, G. (1992). What is a dispositif. In T. J. Armstrong (Ed.), *Michel foucault, philosopher: Essays* (pp. 159–168). New York: Routledge.
Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1st ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press https://www.amazon.com/Thousand-Plateaus-Capitalism-Schizophrenia/dp/0816614024.
Dunn, E. C., & Bobick, M. (2014). The empire strikes back: War without war and occupation without occupation in the Russian sphere of influence. *American Ethnologist, 41*(3), 405–413. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027361.
Dunn, E. C., & Cons, J. (2014). Aleatory sovereignty and the rule of sensitive spaces. *Antipode, 46*(1), 92–109. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12028
Engelstein, L. (1993). Combined underdevelopment: Discipline and the law in imperial and Soviet Russia. *The American Historical Review, 98*(2), 338–353. https://doi.org/10.2307/2166836
Foucault, M. (1978). The history of sexuality. In *An introduction. Pantheon B, 1*New York: Vintage.
Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. New York: Picador.
Ibrahim, Y., & Howarth, A. (2019). Hunger strike and the force-feeding chair: Guantanamo Bay and corporeal surrender. *Environment and Planning: Society and Space D, 37*(2), 294–312.
Kalinina, E. (2017). Becoming patriots in Russia: Biopolitics, fashion, and nostalgia. *Nationalities Papers, 45*(1), 8–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1267133
Kolesnikov, A. (2022). *Opinion: Putin has just laid a landmine under his regime*. CNN, 2022 https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/21/opinions/putin-mobilization-russians-ukraine-counteroffensive-kolesnikov/index.html.
Korobkov, A., Zakharova, D., Tysiachniouk, M., Konnov, A., & Vorobeva, E. (2022). Brain drain from Russia after February 24th 2022. *Russian Analytical Digest, 288*, 2–18. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000582403
Mühlfried, F. (2023). Between hospitality and hostility: Russian citizens in Georgia. *Anthropology Today, 39*(3), 17–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12815
Makarychev, A. (2018). Biopolitics and Russian studies: An introduction. *Russian Politics, 3*(1), 59–67. https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00301003
Makarychev, A. (2022). *Popular biopolitics and populism at Europe's Eastern margins*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004513792
Makarychev, A., & Medvedev, S. (2015). Biopolitics and power in Putin's Russia. *Problems of Post-Communism, 62*(1), 45–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1002340
Makarychev, A., & Yatsyk, A. (2017a). Biopolitics and national identities: Between liberalism and totalization. *Nationalities Papers, 45*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1225705
Makarychev, A., & Yatsyk, A. (2017b). Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies: Reconnecting people or reaggregating lands? *Nationalities Papers, 45*(1), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1248385
Makarychev, A., & Yatsyk, A. (2018a). Illiberal geographies: Popular geopolitics and Russian biopolitical regionalism. *Eurasian Geography and Economics, 59*(1), 51–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2018.1434804
Makarychev, A., & Yatsyk, A. (2018b). No title. In K. Pål, & H. Blakkisrud (Eds.), *Russia before and after Crimea. Nationalism and identity* (pp. 2010–2017). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 93–2017.
Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
Melkumyan, Y., & Melkonyan, M. (2023). Immigration of Russian citizens to Armenia during the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in 2022: Pull-push factors. *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University, 2*(1(4)), 137–147. https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2023.2.4.137
Morejón, G. (2016). Eternal life and the time of death: Biopolitical threat and Miguel Vatter's republic of the living. *Philosophy Today, 60*(2), 553–564. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday2016413120
Naterstad, T. B. (2023). The reproduction of nationalism and the nationalism of reproduction: Putin's biopolitics of defending tradition, 2012–2021. *Nationalities Papers*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2023.85
Papadopoulos, D., & Tsianos, V. S. (2013). After citizenship: Autonomy of migration, organisational ontology and Mobile commons. *Citizenship Studies, 17*(2), 178–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2013.780736
Patton, P. (2000). Deleuze and the political. London https://www.amazon.pl/Deleuze-Political-Paul-Patton/dp/041510064X/ref=sr_1_1?_mk_pl_PL=ÅMÅŽÕÑ&crid=3S7TX8NXNYC9I&keywords=deleuze+and+political+patton&qid=1703858999&sprefix=deleuze+and+political+patton%2Caps%2C101&sr=8-1.
Peters, F., Clare, N., & Davies, T. (2025). Necropolitics and geography. *Progress in Human Geography*. , Article 03091325251348613. https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325251348613. June.
Plamper, J. (2002). Foucault's gulag. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, 3*(2), 255–280. https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2002.0027
Priban, J. (2007). *Liquid society and its law*. London and New York: Routledge.
Prozorov, S. (2013). Living ideas and dead bodies: The biopolitics of stalinism. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political, 38*(3), 208–227. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24569451.
Rapoport, E. (2023). Shock wave of Russian emigration and self-reflections of its representatives. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research, 15*(3), 33–45. https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2023-15-3-33-45
Reid, J. (2008). War, discipline and biopolitics in the thought of Michel foucault. In M. Dillon, & A. W. Neal (Eds.), *Foucault on politics, security and War* (pp. 65–92). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Round, J., & Irina, K. (2016). Necropolitics and the migrant as a political subject of disgust: The precarious everyday of Russia's labour migrants. *Critical Sociology, 42*(7–8), 1017–1034. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516645934
Sanyal, R. (2017). A no-camp policy: Interrogating informal settlements in Lebanon. *Geoforum, 84*, 117–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.011
Stella, F., Taylor, Y., Reynolds, T., & Rogers, A. (2015). *Sexuality, citizenship and belonging: Trans-national and intersectional perspectives*. Routledge. https://books.google.pl/books?id=SsnMCgAAQBAJ.
Tolstaya, K. (2013). Theology and theosis after Gulag. Varlam Shalamov's challenge to theological reflection in postcommunist Russia. In F. Enns, & A. Mosher (Eds.), *Just peace: Ecumenical, intercultural, and interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 50–69). Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
Tolstaya, K. (2023). 'Theology after Gulag, Bucha, and beyond': How can Karl Barth's theology contribute to reorientation in the contemporary European crisis? A post-soviet case. In C. Svinth-Værge Põder, & S. Baark (Eds.), *BT - Crisis and reorientation: Karl Barth's römerbrief in the cultural and intellectual context o* (pp. 215–248). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27677-4_11.
Turner, S. (2016). What is a refugee camp? Explorations of the limits and effects of the camp. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 29*(2), 139–148. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024
Wiertz, T. (2020). Biopolitics of migration: An assemblage approach. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space, 39*(7), 1375–1388. https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420941854