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Imagined Futures of Russia

Among Post-2022 Russian War Migrants

General information

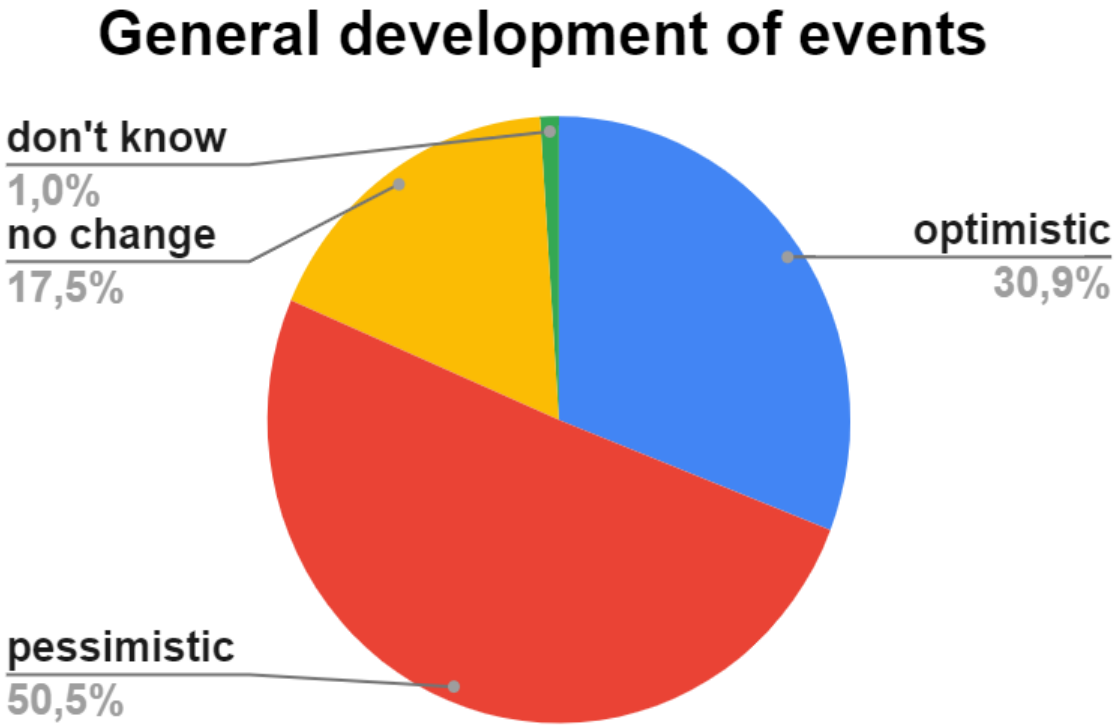
- **Research project:** *Crossing borders, building walls. Towards ethnography of Russian war mobilisation* (NAWA, Jan 2023 – Jan 2024)
- **Aim**: investigate the specificity of the migration wave from Russia sparked by the partial military mobilisation announced on 21 September 2022.
- **Core management**: University of Warsaw (Zuzanna Bogumił, Tomasz Rawski, Katarzyna Roman-Rawska) + partners
- **163 IDIs** with the post-mobilisation migrants from Russia (2nd wave)
    - IDIs conducted between April 2023 – September 2023 (6-12 months after leaving Russia)
    - Average IDI length: 80 minutes.
    - ‚Ordinary people' (neither experts nor elites) > mostly urban middle class from all around Russia
    - Different stages and dimensions of their migratory experience: from taking the decision to leave, through being on the move, to settling down in the new country.
- **9 countries**: Finland, Estonia, Poland, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Serbia.
    - 5 post-Soviet, 4 non-post-Soviet countries (incl. 1 non-post-socialist country).

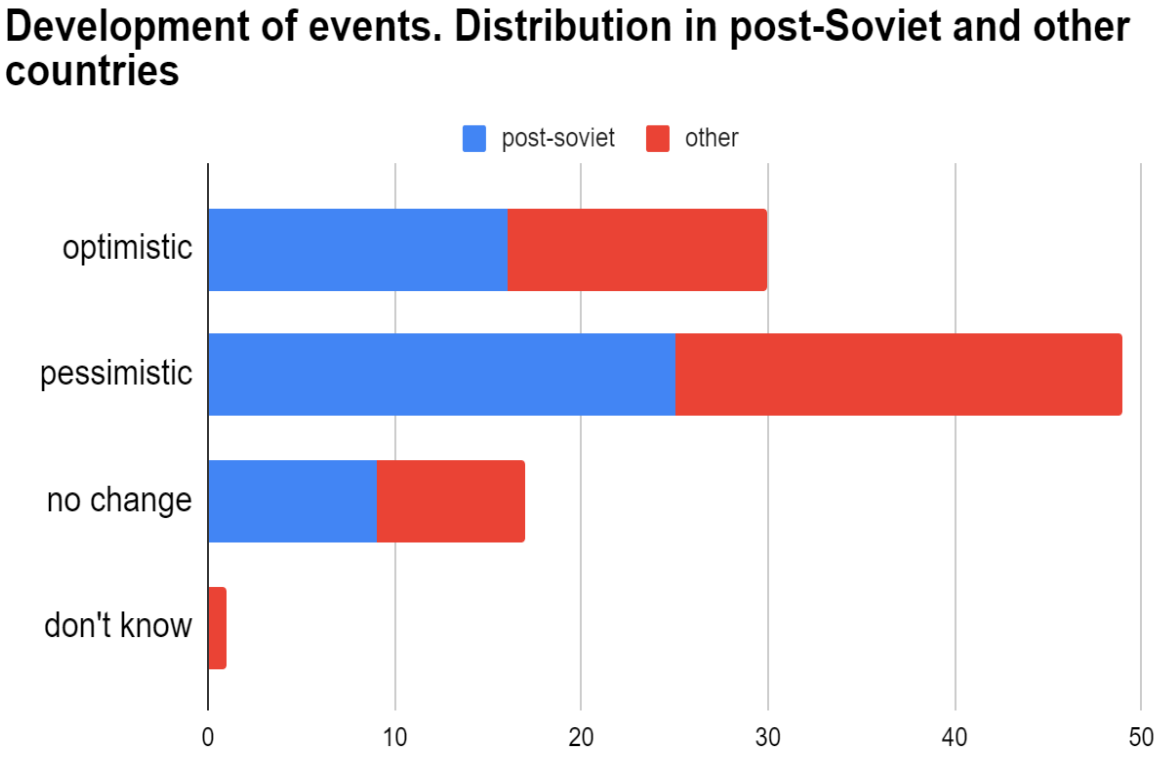
Interview question analyzed today

Какое будущее ждет Россию? / What future lies ahead for Russia?

- open-ended question at the closing section of the IDI
  - not suggesting any specific responses
- **99 responses**
  - more elaborative/coherent (majority) and less elaborative/coherent (minority)
  - different types of answers: realistic scenarios/predictions and fantasies.
  - „ordinary people" do not provide expert analyses but their opinions might reflect elite/media discourses to some extent.
  - different understandings of the 'future':
    - the result of the war / near post-war future / long-term future;

General overview (N=99)





Visions of the future [work in progress…]

fantasies
(un)democratic

Optimistic
change for the better

&

neutral
No change

&

Pessimistic
change for the worse

democratization after the lost war
Ukraine military as engine of change in Russia

democratization after elite change
Russian power elite as engine of change
New power elite puts an end to the war

regime rot
protracted and socially painful

…

tightening of the regime
Power structures keep gaining importance

Post-1945 West Germany

territorial disintegration
can be good or bad

North Korea
classic XX-century totalitarianism

Iran
strong but internationally isolated

! No bottom-up regime change!

Optimistic > democratization after the lost war

- *It seems to me that they [Ukrainians] are **deliberately fighting just a little bit at a time**, so that Putin keeps the feeling that he is in control, [while in reality] he is gradually losing everything (...) such tactics may lead to the fact that the number of incidents like Prigozhin's riot in Russia will increase: one, another, third, fourth, and **at some point it will lead to Putin collapsing*** [SR-05]
- *It doesn't have to be straight that Ukrainians just will come out to the borders of Crimea and the Russian army will abandon it. **A Ukrainian drone might as well kill Putin at the Kremlin*** [PL-07]
- *Yeah, not everyone is ready to pick up a Kalashnikov and go. Well at least learn it, learn to resist, there's even a drone control program. **Yeah, I'd go there, I'd go to drone control and land a drone on the Kremlin**.* [TR-08]

- *Much will depend on **how Ukraine will be supported by the West**: I hope that both the US and the EU have enough political will to support it and* [Ukraine will] *build on that support* [EE-05]

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Optimistic > democratization after the lost war > post-1945 West Germany

- ***Ukraine's victory will bring the same results for Russia as it had for Germany after WWII***. *Russia will follow a different course* [than now]*, a peaceful one, aimed at European integration, which is what happened in Germany. This will be* ***a great lesson for the next generations***. *I hope that the Ukrainian people will be able* ***to forgive*** *the Russian people* [GE-06].
- *This is a war of the future and the past. For some reason, they* [Russian authorities] *want to impose on people some old ways* [of living]: *conquest of land, some imposition of a bi-polar world. Though it is not bipolar for a long time already. (...)* ***I hope that the future will win***. *And I hope that it will launch, it will probably be very hard,* ***it is necessary that*** *the power change, that the mouthpieces change, that on TV* ***they say differently, say that the war should not have happened, that it was wrong. That Russia wasn't defending itself from anyone, that it attacked Ukraine***. *I think the whole paradigm has to be overturned*. [MN-17]
- *All these* ***territories that were taken, they will be returned****, although I'm not sure Crimea will be returned as well* [MN-18]

Optimistic > democratization after the lost war > territorial disintegration

- ***The collapse of the empire to make things better*** (KZ-12, ethnic Yakut from Siberia)
- *You have to let those people who want to live on their own, let them go (…) It's about those people who, let's say,* ***those parts of the country that will separate and become independent*** *(...) If* ***Chechnya, let's say, separates from Russia*** *(…) and his* [Kadyrov's] *regime is completely dismantled there,* ***then God with it, let them separate****.* (PL-01, ethnic Russian from Volgograd)
- *Siberia wanted to secede in 2013, to stop feeding Moscow, there were even such separatist slogans,* ***I fully support that Siberia should be independent. And it will be independent. And Yakutia too*** *- it supplies diamonds, I have a Yakut acquaintance who says, we live in poverty. Why? Why do I need such citizenship, which gives me no rights? Only slave obligations. That's how it is.* (TR-08,ethnic Russian from Siberia)
- *Such sentiments are separatist to the max. It is clear that* ***one wants to believe in some kind of free Buryatia*** (...) *Perhaps there will be some kind of unification of national republics or the Far East or Siberia, something like that* (MN-13, ethnic Buryat).

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Optimistic > democratization after elite change

- *I hope that Putin will die quickly, and **some coup-d-etat will take place and all this will be over with minimal casualties**. So that these endless sufferings in Ukraine would be stopped, it's just, it's a cruelty what they have done there, and continue to do. It doesn't matter how, the main thing is to save more human lives. It's clear that, maybe I'm expressing myself in an unpopular way, that **Ukraine should certainly be given back its territorial integrity, including Crimea and other things*** [EE-07].
- ***If we get free elections, it will be possible to win and it will be possible to reform**. Sanctions will only be lifted if Ukraine is returned to its borders, all occupied territories are returned, elections are announced in Russia and political prisoners are released* [PL-07]

Optimists > Fantasies

- meritocratic utopia:

*If we could build an awesome system, let's call it **a system of filtration**, yes, well, in essence, it is about selection. We organize selection committee according to certain characteristics. (...) **We have to build a very rigid system (...) and adjust this filter [and] pull out talents**, because very often talented very cool dudes, smart and with high standards, they just don't want to get into this shit. We have to offer such great conditions if they are ready to work (...) And if we build this system, it can give great results very quickly. **And then there will be democracy, but only after everyone passed this filter**. And there, for example, one couple of people asked me: Will Navalny pass? I don't know. It doesn't matter. He will have to put up with it. Because it will be absolutely something insurmountable. Maybe there will be a multi-stage filter. Roughly speaking, you go up to some level and then you only go further if you have raised your qualifications* [SR-03]

- self-sufficient autarky:

***If we fence off Russia** and stop selling oil and gas, **Russia can exist like China, in a closed cycle, for a thousand years** (...) **and we will still have everything**: we will have clean water, oil, gasoline, petrochemicals, the victory of civilization. If I were him* [Putin], *I would play this card (...) We are closing, yes, we are closing, just as the Chinese temporarily closed their state, so **we will close from the whole world. And, in fact, we will solve all our problems**, yes, we will not go there, to Europe; we will not have the latest iPhone; yes, but you will have light at home and gas and food, and they will run out of gas, because they will be cut off from our resources.* [PL-02]

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Pessimistic > General sources

- *The reality is that* ***Western countries may stop supporting Ukraine*** (...) *it is not possible to support it indefinitely* (EE-04).
- *The* ***Future Russia has moved to prison*** [i.e. Navalny] *and will most likely remain there* (AM-01)
- *140 million brainwashed people aren't going anywhere. Yes, there are people who understand* [what is going on]*, but who will listen to them, who will support them?* (KZ-11)
- *And* ***noone will come to liberate us****. It's clear* (KZ-09)
- *The Aliens won't come and take him* [Putin] *away* (PL-02).

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Pessimistic > tightening of the regime > North Korea

- *The border will close, **there will be North Korea*** **[in Russia].** *There will be a totalitarian state*. (PL_02);
- [any] *dissent will be persecuted, only the war party, there will be no other parties* (TR-08)
- [We will have] *a North Korea scenario, that the whole world is against us* (MN-10)
- *Russia will be fenced off with a barbed wire fence and moat with crocodiles, as everyone is saying* (PL-07).

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- *If someone even worse than Putin comes to power,* [we will have] *the Soviet Union of the 1930s. Something like that will probably happen* (MN-11)

Pessimistic > tightening of the regime > Iran

- *Russia will remain a pariah, but it will not die, it is huge, it is strong, and has a deep margin of economic safety* (FI-04)
- ***We will live like Iran**, maybe just a little better, because Russia is still to some extent an attractive trading partner, and Russia will probably not be isolated completely, as Iran is* (KZ-22)
- *Everyone's gonna be closing down, I think. Only the strongest companies, the state ones or supported by the state, they will somehow stay afloat. But those people, ordinary people, who have their own dreams to create something, they will be destroyed, broken* (AM-11).

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Pessimistic > Regime rot

- ***Russia will die as a state*** *(...) That's it. Nothing will develop in Russia any more (...) It will be a country that will just slowly die, die, die...* (TR-02)
- *I believe, for sure, that* ***there will be another one, and another one, Comrade Prigozhin****, who will go out there and start gambling* (...) *everything will quietly rot, periodically exploding* (SR-09)
- (…) *If there are changes, then Tatarstan will want independence, then Chechnya, and when Chechnya wants independence, there will be a very big problem, because there will be wars, and then there is Ingushetia, plus, of course, Abkhazia, which is part of Georgia, meaning that* ***there could be a lot of conflicts in the south***. (EE-04).
- *Russian border towns too, everything is destroyed there too.* ***Noone will rebuild it, sponsor it or resurrect it****. I don't believe in that*. (EE-09).

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- *I think it will be like the late Soviet Union, maybe worse* (GE-05)

Some preliminary conclusions

- A very strong tendency to articulate scenarios considered at least **moderately realistic** = the question of Russia's **future vitally important** for respondents despite the fact that they out-migrated
- Imagined futures relying mostly on **already-existing blueprints** coming from two main sources = pan-European memory of the 20th-century past of Europe and media images of currently existing non-democratic states.
- Influential **decolonial paradigm** envisioning a territorial breakup of Russia interpreted in two contradictory ways = clear influence of disputes led by the Russian elites in-exile.

Thank you.

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PROJECT WEBSITE: https://iaepan.edu.pl/crossing-borders-building-walls-towards-ethnography-of-russian-war-mobilisation-2/