Original Article

Received/Accepted Dates

11.12.2024/29.01.2025

DOI 10.52096/usbd.9.37.19

International Journal of Social Sciences

Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi

www.sobider.net e-ISSN: 2548-0685

IJSS

Contextualizing Russian Diaspora: A Historical Trajectory in Turkey

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Summary

This article examines the historical development of the Russian diaspora and its ties with Turkey, analyzing the migration trends, socio-political influences, and key events that have shaped their presence in the country. It analyzes the causes and impacts of emigration from Russia to Turkey, from the waves of migration following the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the more recent influx driven by the war in Ukraine. The article highlights the socio-political context of these migrations and their role in reshaping Russian diaspora. It explores different periods, including the White Russian exodus, Stalin-era deportations, the migration of political dissidents, and the economic transitions of the post-Soviet period that triggered further migration. Additionally, focusing on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the study explores the resulting migration waves, the demographic structure of the Russian diaspora in Turkey, their settlement patterns, and return migration tendencies, analyzing these developments within the broader historical context of migration since the establishment of the Soviet Union. The development of the Russian diaspora and the case of Turkey are analyzed through its historical transformation, a perspective not yet explored comprehensively in the existing literature.

Key Words: Russian Diaspora, migration pattern, Turkey, Russia

Rus Diasporası'nı Bağlamlandırmak: Türkiye'deki Tarihsel Seyi

Özet

Bu makale, Rus diasporasının tarihsel gelişimini ve Türkiye ile olan bağlarını inceleyerek, göç trendlerini, sosyo-politik etkileri ve ülkedeki varlıklarını şekillendiren önemli olayları analiz etmektedir. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonraki göç dalgalarından, Ukrayna'daki savaştan kaynaklanan daha yakın dönemdeki göç akışına kadar, Rusya'dan Türkiye'ye yapılan göçlerin nedenlerini ve etkilerini analiz etmektedir. Makale, bu göçlerin sosyo-politik bağlamını ve Rus diasporasını yeniden şekillendirmedeki rolünü vurgulamaktadır. Beyaz Rus göçü, Stalin dönemi zorunlu göçleri, siyasi muhaliflerin göçü ve Sovyet sonrası dönemin ekonomik geçişlerinin tetiklediği göçler gibi farklı dönemleri ele almaktadır. Ayrıca, 2022'deki Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgaline odaklanarak, oluşan göç dalgalarını, Türkiye'deki Rus diasporasının demografik yapısını, yerleşim desenlerini ve geri göç eğilimlerini inceleyerek, Sovyetler Birliği'nin kurulmasından bu yana yaşanan göç süreçlerini daha geniş bir tarihsel bağlamda analiz etmektedir. Rus diyasporasının gelişimi ve Türkiye örneği tarihsel dönüşümü ışığında ele alınarak analiz edilmiştir; bu tür kapsamlı bir tarihsel inceleme literatürde bulunmamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rus Diyasporası, göç örütüleri, Türkiye, Rusya

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Introduction

The Russian diaspora has a complex and multifaceted history, shaped by political upheavals, economic crises, and shifting international relations. From the initial waves of migration following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, to the more recent movements stimulated by political repression and economic instability, Russian emigrants have established vibrant communities across the globe (Herbst & Erofeev 2019). Notably, Turkey has emerged as a key destination for Russian emigrants, particularly following the war in Ukraine. The country's strategic geographical location, combined with its historical and cultural ties to Russia, has made it an attractive hub for a range of Russians, including businesspeople, professionals, and dissidents seeking refuge from both the political climate in Russia and the broader challenges posed by the international sanction's regime.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Russian diaspora (Gudkov et la 2024). The war not only deepened existing political divisions within Russia, but it also exacerbated the exodus of individuals seeking to escape growing repression and the international isolation that followed (Herbst & Erofeev, 2019). The economic sanctions imposed on Russia, alongside the country's increased political authoritarianism under Putin, further fueled migration flows (Herbst & Erofeev, 2019). The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Russian society have reshaped the nature of this diaspora, with the experience of displacement. This migration, however, is an active reshaping of Russian identity abroad, with the Turkish context playing a role in this transnational dynamic.

This paper explores the development of the Russian diaspora and its historical relationship with Turkey, providing a historical perspective on the evolution of migration waves since the establishment of the Soviet Union. By tracing the roots of Russian emigration, from the post-Soviet transition period to the more recent waves spurred by political repression and the war in Ukraine, the paper aims to contextualize the dynamics of Russian migration within a broader historical framework. As the Russian diaspora evolves, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war and increasing political repression in Russia, Turkey has become an increasingly significant destination

(Krawatzek & Sasse 2024). This paper explores how these migration flows have historically shaped the formation of Russian communities in Turkey.

Theoretical Framework and Data

Many regions in the "post-socialist world", including Russia before and after the invasion, have begun to experience "emptying"—a loss of key elements such as people, infrastructure, services, and envisioned futures (Dzenovska et al. 2023). While for some, this emptying signifies loss, for others, it has become an opportunity (Dzenovska et al. 2023). At the macro level, migrants' search for opportunities are increasingly constrained by structural inequalities and political decisions in the era of "post-politics", where traditional ideological conflicts give way to technical solutions, leading to a depoliticized political discourse that prioritizes consensus over meaningful democratic engagement. (Dzenovska et al. 2023). At the micro-level, the search for opportunities further intensifies debates surrounding the inadequacies of concepts such as "transit country" or "refugee," which fail short in responding to present circumstances.

Alongside the rise of authoritarian populist regimes in the era of post-politics, diasporas are often viewed as imagined communities of migrants who share a common origin, whether real or perceived, in a location different from where they currently reside (Meer 2014). Important aspects that contribute to a sense of diaspora include a feeling of community, the continuation of collective ethnic identity, connections to a distant homeland, and cultural mixing (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007; Kenny, 2013). This means that migrants are not inherently part of a diaspora; rather, diaspora is a process, embracing a diasporic identity (Brubaker 2005) and encompasses significant internal differences, including variations in race, gender, sexuality, and age (Brah, 1996; Mavroudi 2018). As a result, diaspora communities are made up of diverse individuals who share certain characteristics, both real and imagined. Diaspora or transnational communities often remain psychologically, socially, economically and politically connected to their countries of origin, and are significant development stakeholders not only there, but also their destination countries.

A growing body of research describes diaspora as a "transnational social organization" that relates to both the country of origin and the host country (Bauböck 2010; Faist and Bilecen 2019; Lacroix 2024). Primarily viewed as a cohesive community marked by a shared "diasporic consciousness," diasporas reflect the intensified transnational practices of migrants, facilitated through social networks that transcend the political and geographic boundaries of individual nation-states (Wahlbeck 2002; Jones 2022). These practices encompass a wide range of activities, including political engagement (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003) and various social, cultural, and economic exchanges (Vertovec 2009). Therefore, beyond economic considerations, it is essential to examine the social and cultural dimensions of migration, as well as the lived experiences, identity transformations, and social connections of migrants, to gain a comprehensive understanding of diaspora and migration (Castles et al. 2020).

Along with this framework, this article comprehensively contextualizes the history of the Russian diaspora and its relations with Turkey. Under the sanctions imposed to Russia, the formation of a new diaspora presents unique challenges distinct other diaspora experiences, sparking debates over the constraints on their agency due to the rise of authoritarian populism in Russia. Given the limitations of this community, Russian emigrants as "in-betweeners," experience a migration process that connects their place of origin to various destinations and encompasses different moments in their migration trajectory, placing them in intermediate spaces and temporal points. As the roles of refugees and migrants, typically defined by formal arrangements and legal frameworks, often fall short in practice, the fluid category of "in-betweeners" highlights the context-specific redefinitions of these roles (Crawley and Jones 2021). Thus, this approach sheds light on the interplay between migrant's agency and broader socio-political contexts.

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of secondary sources to critically reassess waves of migration contributing to the development of the Russian diaspora. It involves an in-depth review and analysis of existing academic literature, addressing both historical and contemporary aspects of Russian migration. Additionally, a wide range of data sets—including demographic statistics, migration records, and reports from national and international organizations—were analyzed to offer a more detailed perspective on migration trends and policy outcomes. Beyond academic sources, this study closely examines recent reports from public institutions, various organizations, and civil society groups. By integrating policy analysis, statistical data, and field-based insights, this study provides a comprehensive perspective on Russian emigration, focusing on the evolving nature of the diaspora—its demographic composition and settlement patterns—in Turkey.

Contextualizing Russian Diaspora: Past

The development of Russian diaspora since the early 20th century is categorized into five significant waves, followed by the wave after the Russian invasion in 2022: the White Russian exodus, the Stalinist displacement, the dissident and minority exodus, transition migration, and the recent Putin exodus. Often overlooked, the Putin exodus represented the emergence of a new Russian diaspora before the invasion of Ukraine, largely consisting of educated and entrepreneurial individuals seeking opportunities overseas.

Before the Soviet Union: From White Russian Exodus to “Russia Abroad”

In the early 20th century, the overthrow of the tsarist regime, 1917 Russian Revolution, the subsequent civil war ending with the defeat of the White Army and the famine of 1921 stimulated the White Russian Exodus[1], the first wave. It is estimated that their displacement resulted in the emigration of up to two million people across vast geographical distances (Korobkov and Zaionchkovskaya 2012). As the Archangel forces reached England on British ships, Admiral Kolchak's army dispersed in the Far East and travelled to China and Japan via the Trans-Siberian Railway, with some eventually moving further and settling on the Pacific Coast of the United States. (Schaufuss 1939; Robinson 2002). While the defeated Western Armies fled from Petrograd to Finland and the Baltics, the Archangel forces reached England via British ship and were followed by other unequal waves. The dispersion of the army of Admiral Kolchak in the Far East reached to China and Japan by trans-Siberian trek. Part of the Far-Eastern settlement emigrated to the Pacific Coast of the United States, centering particularly in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle (Schaufuss 1939).

Gathered in Odessa, Crimea, and Kuban on the Black Sea, the Southern Army under General Denikin and Wrangel constituted the most cohesive and largest civilian group, accompanied by boatloads of military personnel and the entire First Army Corps. In November 1920, the Southern Army, along with the largest and most cohesive civilian group led by Generals Denikin and Wrangel, left Crimea for Istanbul before scattering to cities across Europe, including Paris, Berlin,

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[1] White Russians has been used to describe those who were mainly members of the nobility, tsarist officers, and intellectuals (artists, writers, balletdancers, musicians etc.), feared the Bolshevik government and fled Russia.

Prague, Sofia, and Belgrade (Schaufuss 1939; Robinson 2002). The movements of White Russians resulted in the formation of different emigrant communities in major European cities known as "Russia abroad," a term that underscored their shared experience of forced departure while emphasizing their linguistic and cultural ties to Russia (Glad 1999).

On the other hand, under the command of General Wrangel, the White Guards believed that they were the last remaining institution of the Russian state; and the only way to liberate Russia was to preserve the army and conduct an armed struggle against the Bolsheviks (Robinson 1999). Therefore, in order to preserve the identity of the White Army, if not the entity itself, on 1 September 1924, a unique organization was formed known as the Russian All-Military Union (ROVS (Robinson 1999). Not only was this intended to maintain the cohesion of the former White Russian movement, but ROVS was explicitly intended to mobilize émigrés for a possible renewed war against Communist Russia (Robinson1999). While the formation of the ROVS marked a crucial attempt to preserve the identity and continuity of the White Guards, it ultimately failed to achieve its primary goal of mobilizing émigrés for a renewed armed struggle against Soviet Russia.

Despite certain limitations, Russia abroad maintained contacts with motherland, during the Lenin era. Many of them held hopes of returning to Russia, and re-instituting their culture and tradition, until the outbreak the World War II, during the era of Stalin, characterized by strict control of population movements and forced resettlement programs. Building a strong diaspora posed a challenge for the relatively secure White Russians, as the multiple ties they established with their motherland proved ineffective due to the political rupture between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, especially under Stalin's rule.

During the Soviet Union: From Stalinist Displacement to Dissolution

The Soviet Union experienced a series of displacements and mass migrations that were shaped by political repression, war, and Stalinist policies. From the early purges under Joseph Stalin to the mass deportations during and after World War II, millions of people were forcibly moved from their homes, often without consent, leading to the creation of new diasporas and the reshaping of national borders. This period marked a significant period in Soviet history, characterized by large-scale population transfers, the targeting of ethnic minorities, and the exile of dissidents, shaping the second and third waves of the Russian diaspora.

Stalinist Displacement

The Stalinist displacement, the second wave, was a crucial aspect of the Soviet Union's history, marked by systemic repression, mass deportations, and political purges that reshaped the Soviet social composition. During the Stalin era, the state initiated a wide-reaching effort to eliminate perceived threats to its authority, which included the mass relocation of ethnic groups, dissidents, and prisoners. This displacement, which occurred through both force and fear, not only disrupted the lives of millions but also created long-lasting diasporas, particularly in countries such as Turkey, which would become a key refuge for those fleeing Soviet repression. Indeed, World War II triggered the **Stalinist displacement** aligning with mass deportations targeting ethnic groups deemed "socially harmful elements" by Stalin's regime. This wave comprised displaced persons, prisoners of war, Ostarbeiters, surviving veterans of certain armed units, and non-returnees of various backgrounds (William 2002). But this era also witnessed the Great Terror (1936–1938), a period of mass repression in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. It is marked by widespread political purges, executions, and forced labor camps. The state's perceived enemies, including Communist Party members, military officers, intellectuals, and ethnic minorities, were systematically targeted. For instance, by 1938, over 56,000 ethnic Germans had been arrested, with nearly 42,000 executed, despite only 820 holding German Reich citizenship (Kotljarchuk & Sundström 2018).

Along with the Ostarbetiers, in 1942-1944, Nazis took from 3 to 5 million civilians for forced labour from the occupied territories of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In Germany, they were called "Ostarbeiters" (translated from German as eastern workers), who were sent to hard work - factories and mines, less often to agriculture. Among the millions of forced laborers driven to Germany from all over Europe, the inhabitants of the Soviet Union were inferior. A substantial majority of them were reluctant to return home and chose to evade the pervasive threat of Stalinist persecution. Regarded as traitors and war criminals in the SU, they were primarily dissolved in the society of their new country of residence. An estimated 500,000-800,000 emigrants settled in Germany, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, in the immediate postwar period (Herbst and Erofeev 2019).

Regarding the "cleaning up" the Soviet borders from the "socially harmful elements" under the Stalin regime, seven ethnic groups were deported from their native territories en masse: the Volga Germans; the Chechens, Ingush and Karachay (end of 1943); the Kalmyks and Balkars of the Northern Caucasus (winter of 1944); and the Crimean Tatars (in May 1944) (William 2002). Indeed, throughout the Russian geopolitics and Slavization policies of the18th and 19th century, Crimeans and Circassians were forced to leave Russia, leading to emigration to Ottoman lands (Arslan 2008; Kaya 2005). In the 20th century, again, many thousands of deportees perished en route to their forced destinations, while numerous individuals and families sought to escape the political repression by fleeing the country altogether.

The masse exile of both Crimeans and Circassians led to the formation of diaspora communities notably in Turkey, Romania, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the United States. Regardless of ethnicity, all Caucasian peoples in the diaspora (Adyghe-Kabardey, Shapsug, Besleney, Abzeh, Bjeduğ, Hatukuay, Çemguy, Natuhay, Yegerugay, Temirguay, Memheğ and Mahosh-Abkhaz, Abaza, Ubykh, even Ossetian, Chechen, Ingush, Karachay, Balkar and Dagestan communities) became known as "Circassians". These communities often preserved their cultural identities and maintained connections to their homeland. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization allowed Circassians[2] to return to their homeland, but Crimean Tatars could only return after Ukraine gained independence in 1991 (Herbst and Erofeev 2019; William 2002).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Circassians have constructed transnational communities that culturally, politically, and economically connect their homeland (the republics of Adygea, Karachai-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria) with their diaspora in Turkey, as well as in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Approximately 2.5 million Circassians reside in Turkey, and population projections estimate that between 3 to 5 million Crimean Tatars live there (Akdeniz-Göker 2018). Today, Turkey hosts the largest Crimean Tatar diaspora population. With Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, many Crimean Tatars were forced to take Russian passports, relocate from Crimea, and were called to fight against Ukraine. Those who refused to join the

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conflict either fled to safe countries like Turkey or accepted prison sentences of up to three years. In 2022, an estimated 1,000 Crimean Tatars fled to Turkey to escape Russian mobilization, with some describing this situation as the second exile. The Crimean diaspora has maintained strong ties to Crimea, creating diasporic organizations to carry out ethnic identity-oriented activities in Turkey (Deniz 2023; Aydın 2000).

Dissident and Minority Exodus

The third wave of emigrants involved the **dissident and minority exodus** leaving the SU for political reasons. Indeed, many of them under the Soviet regime faced significant persecution on their activities during 1960s and 1970s (Pohl 2012). Thus, figures like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a renowned Russian novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1974, and Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet and essayist who received the same honour after moving to the USA in 1987, were effectively forced to leave the country due to their writings, which played a crucial role in revealing the harsh realities of life under Stalin's regime (Pohl 2012). The Soviet authorities allowed certain dissidents to go abroad, as a way to alleviate international pressure and criticism they face for persecuting them. Therefore, unlike the earlier waves, which were often marked by chaotic and involuntary displacement, the third wave of emigration has been legal and regulated movements of mostly three national minorities – Jews, ethnic Germans and Armenians. The Soviet authorities called this wave as “sausage emigration” to ironically imply that their primary motive for leaving was economic gain rather than ideological dissent (Pohl 2012; Polian 2004). Indeed, the term reflects not only certain scepticism towards them but also a notable effort by the Soviet government to control the narrative surrounding emigration and dissent.

Prior to the breakup of the SU, there was a small yet notable presence of Russians in Turkey, alongside the development of the Crimean and Circassian diasporas, which can be traced back to the Circassian exile in the late 19th century (Kaya 2004). Primarily consisting of political refugees, intellectuals, or members of the Russian aristocracy fleeing the SU during and after the Russian Revolution and World War II, these individuals often sought asylum in Turkey due to its proximity to the SU and its neutral stance during the Cold War. While the exact number of Russians in Turkey during this period may not be well-documented, their presence laid the foundation for future Russian diaspora in Turkey. In general, political factors like the revolution, civil war, persecution on religious and cultural grounds, fear of repression after World War II, and deprivation of particular ethnic groups have resulted in mass emigration up to the collapse of the SU in 1991. Historically, these factors played a decisive role in creating the conditions of no return and, for most groups, (with the exception of political dissidents of the 1960–1980s), loss of interest in the country of exodus.

In conclusion, the Stalinist period of forced displacement and the subsequent waves of emigration reshaped not only the Soviet Union but also the global landscape of Russian diaspora communities. These events forged new connections between displaced Soviet peoples and the countries where they sought refuge, particularly in places like Turkey. The consequences of Stalinist repression, forced labor, and political purges continued to reverberate long after the regime's collapse, influencing the patterns of Russian migration in the latter half of the 20th century and beyond.

After the Soviet Union: From Dissolution to Putin Exodus

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a profound economic and political transformation that prompted waves of migration. Transition migration in the early 1990s as the fourth wave, was driven by the collapse of the Soviet state, marked by a deep economic depression and the shift from a closed, centrally planned economy to a free-market system. This transition induced mass emigration, especially among ethnic groups such as Jews, ethnic Germans, and Armenians, who sought opportunities in countries like Germany, Israel, and the United States. The migration also included a large brain drain, with skilled professionals, scientists, and intellectuals leaving Russia for better prospects.

As the new Russian Federation navigated its growing pains, the emigration flows expanded, with temporary labor migration also increasing during the late 1990s. The surge in Russian migration diversified into various forms, including labor migration, student exchanges, and marital migrations, spreading across the globe and establishing new diasporic communities, including a significant presence in countries such as Turkey. The influx of these emigrants reflected the broader global shift in migration patterns as Russia opened up to the world after decades of isolation.

Transition Migration

After the dissolution, Russia has entered in a deep and prolonged economic depression spurred by the chaotic transition from a closed to free market economy. Under the wave of **transition migration**, the early 1990s saw a surge in emigration, primarily driven by ethnic migration to countries such as Germany, Israel, and the United States, resulting in significant demographic shifts and a substantial brain drain as Western countries actively sought to attract skilled individuals, including scientists, professionals, and intellectuals (Heleniak 2004; Korobkov and Zaionchkovskaya 2012).

In the second half of the 1990s, Russians looking for employment joined the increasing number of temporary labour migrants. They filled various niches in developed labour markets ranging from low skilled jobs to positions requiring better education and high qualifications (Aleshkovski et al. 2018). This movement encompassed diverse flows of migration, such as circular/temporary migration (seasonal workers, shuttle traders, entrepreneurs of various backgrounds), student and marital migration. The statistics for the period from 1992 to 1994 show that approximately 1.5-2 million people emigrated abroad (Aleshkovski et al. 2018). In general, Russian emigrants dispersed globally, with significant communities forming in Germany, Israel, the United States, and Canada. Other popular destinations included the former Soviet republics, particularly Ukraine and Kazakhstan, as well as Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, where economic opportunities and cultural ties played key roles. As a result, Russia—previously one of the most isolated countries in the world—quickly became, after 1991, the center of a vast Eurasian migration system that was one of the four largest in the world (alongside those in North America; Western Europe; and the Middle East, centered on the Persian Gulf (Korobkov 2022).

However, Putin's rise to the presidency ushered in a series of economic reforms, including restructuring the economy and repaying Russia's international debt. These changes fostered relative political stability and economic growth, which, along with an improving standard of living, significantly contributed to Putin’s popularity. As a result, a notable decline in emigration was observed throughout the 2000s (Ageeva and Akopov 2022). Although the scale of emigration has decreased, significant changes have taken place in its patterns. With growing interest in economic partnerships with other countries, Russian businesspeople have increasingly turned their attention to more stable and secure Western markets (Aleshkovski et al. 2018). Acquiring properties abroad for temporary or permanent migration, studying overseas and pursuing well-paying jobs, particularly in IT, have also contributed to this trend (Aleshkovski et al. 2018; Korobkov et al. 2022). While maintaining middle to strong ties with Russia, Russian emigrants have successfully established diasporic communities abroad that, in turn, have become attractive magnets for potential emigrants from Russia (Gudkov et al. 2024). Beyond the traditional destinations of the United States, Germany, or Israel, these newly emerging emigration patterns have indeed created their own routes and destinations in various parts of the world, — from Spain to Vietnam and from Finland to Turkey (Korobkov 2022; Gudkov et al. 2024).

Throughout the 2000s, there was a significant increase in the number of Russians living in Turkey. The shock of the SU's dissolution and the relaxation of travel restrictions facilitated short-term visits, long-term stays, and intermarriages beyond the post-Soviet space. The shuttle trade emerged as an informal trade activity and survival strategy, while circular flows from tourism led to an influx of “so-called tourists” (Yükseker 2003) Furthermore, the growing number of Russian tourists contributed to the solidification of their visits and sparked other forms of migration, such as lifestyle migration for retirement and intermarriage (Deniz and Özgür 2021). Despite some political disputes, throughout 2000s, the enhanced economic cooperation with Russia, along with the important projects like the Blue Stream, or Mersin-Akkuyu Nuclear Plant project, contributed to the initiation of business migration. All in all, this flourishing cross-border mobility has not only increased social ties among emigrants but also strengthened transnational practices and led to the formation of (post-Soviet) Russian diasporic communities in several Turkish cities, particularly Istanbul and Antalya.

Putin Exodus

Despite Putin’s heightened popularity after the annexation of Crimea, the decline in oil prices in 2014, along with the Kremlin’s weakening economic performance and rising political repression, has led to increased emigration as the fifth wave: **Putin exodus** (Herbst and Erofeev 2019). Kremlin permits and even encourages it, as a mean to exclude “dissidents” from mainstream political and economic life, similar to practices in the 1960s and 1970s (Rapoport 2024; Mukhina 2023). The surge in emigration primarily involves young, educated, and entrepreneurial Russians, especially from the IT sector, along with creative workers, activists, students, scientists, professionals, and businesspeople, many of whom actively engage in social developments in their homeland and maintain strong connections to Russian affairs (Gudkov et al. 2024). In 2015, Russia ranked third in the world—after India and Mexico—in terms of its number of emigrants: 10.5 million (Korobkov 2022). But these waves are further complicated by the heritage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Korobkov 2022).

This emigration wave, particularly among Russia's intellectual and professional elite, has reshaped the global Russian diaspora, facilitating the rise of a more diverse, globally dispersed network (Korobkov 2022; Litovskaya and Litovskya 2022). This transnational Russian community has expanded beyond its traditional destinations in Western Europe and the U.S., reaching into regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and even parts of Latin America, becoming key hubs for these migrants. Despite the Kremlin's encouragement of this outward migration to rid the country of dissenting voices, some continue to advocate for social and political change in their homeland. The emergence of these "Global Russians" has not only redefined the Russian diaspora but has also contributed to the broader discussion on authoritarianism, migration, and global networks of resistance. The combination of transition migration and the subsequent Putin Exodus represents significant shifts in Russian migration patterns, fundamentally altering the composition and political roles of the Russian diaspora. Both migration waves reflect the interplay between political change and migration, as individuals navigate new opportunities and respond to the pressures of life under authoritarian rule. As these diasporic communities continue to grow and become increasingly transnational, their influence on both their host countries and their homeland continues to expand.

Contextualizing Russian Diaspora in Turkey: Present

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, estimates suggest that up to one million Russians (as the sixth wave) left the country between 2022 and 2023, driven by opposition to political decisions, the war, fears of repression, and economic instability (Kamalov et al. 2022; 2023). This wave primarily comprises young, middle-class, highly educated individuals with strong social networks and liberal views (Kamalov et al. 2022; Ivetta and Kamalov 2024). These urban, politically engaged groups aim to integrate into Western professional environments and connect with the broader global Russian network—a cosmopolitan and transnational diaspora spread across the world (Ivetta and Kamalov 2024; Kostenko et al. 2023, Ageeva and Akopov 2022). The varied composition of this outflow—from political opposition to those driven by pragmatic concerns such as preserving employment with Western companies, and a larger group fearing conscription—illustrates the scale of emigration. In this study, all these individuals are referred to as emigrants.

After Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Shifting Patterns and New Waves

Initially, Russian migration was directed towards neighboring countries such as Finland and Estonia. However, the rapid imposition of Western sanctions and subsequent border closures expanded migration patterns to include Central Asia (Armenia, Georgia), Eastern Europe (Serbia, Montenegro), Turkey, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. A smaller proportion of emigrants have reached more distant destinations, including Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam) and South America (Argentina, Brazil) (Karaçay 2023; Ruseishvili and Ryazetsev 2024). As one of the lesser-studied cases of Russian emigration, Turkey offers a favorable setting for Russian emigrants post-invasion. The distinct waves of emigration highlight changing patterns in these flows.

Emerging Waves of Post-Invasion Emigration

The first wave of Russian emigration primarily involved individuals fleeing the immediate effects of war and the intensifying political repression Kamalov et al. 2022; 2023). This group, composed largely of individuals who had been politically active or vocal against the government, was motivated by the increasing restrictions on freedom of speech, media, and the growing threat of conscription. Turkey, with its geographical proximity and relative political openness, became a primary destination. Many of these emigrants are intellectuals, journalists, and activists, who are now contributing to global discourse surrounding the war and Russia's authoritarian regime.

The second wave of migration consisted of individuals who were not politically active but felt the economic and social pressures arising from the war (Kamalov et al. 2022; 2023). Business owners, entrepreneurs, and professionals in sectors heavily impacted by sanctions sought stability in countries like Turkey, which offered a more favorable economic environment than other regions affected by the war. While this group is less vocal in its opposition to the Kremlin, they contribute significantly to the economic footprint of the Russian diaspora.

By 2023, the third wave of Russian emigration emerged in response to rising conscription and widespread fear of being drafted (Herbst and Erofeev 2022). This cohort, more diverse in background, consisted of military-age men and their families, as well as individuals seeking to escape potential imprisonment or persecution under the new war laws. Turkey, which has not imposed visa restrictions on Russians, has seen an increase in the presence of Russians in cities such as Istanbul and Antalya.

Shifting Patterns within the Russian Diaspora

These waves of migration, while immediate responses to the crisis, also reflect deeper, long-term shifts within the Russian diaspora. Increasingly, migration flows are characterized by a younger, more diverse, and tech-savvy demographic, as evidenced by the rise of Russian digital nomads in cities like Istanbul. These individuals, often highly skilled professionals from IT, finance, and creative sectors, are driven by both geopolitical factors and a desire for more personal freedoms. Unlike earlier waves, which were often motivated by political repression or economic hardship, this group seeks an environment where they can thrive professionally and personally, free from the shadow of Russia's increasingly authoritarian regime.

The role of countries like Turkey in accommodating these new waves of Russian emigrants is critical. Turkey’s neutral stance on the conflict, its geographical proximity, cultural ties, and favorable visa policies have made it an attractive destination. Turkish easy visa policies have enabled entrance of Russian emigrants into local sectors such as technology, education, and real estate, where Russian professionals have contributed significantly. The rise of Russian-speaking communities in cities like Istanbul further highlights the growing influence of Russia’s educated elite in shaping the global Russian diaspora.

In terms of volume of emigration, according to the Table 1, Russian citizens were the largest foreign population group in Turkey in 2022, totaling 151,049 individuals (75,060 male, 75,989 female) out of a total foreign population of 1,823,836. This represented a significant increase, more than doubling from 66,786 in 2021. Although Russian citizens continued to lead the list in 2023, their numbers declined to just over 102,585, indicating a clear trend of returning emigrants.

Table 1: Russian and Ukrainian Citizens in Turkey (2021-2023)

	2021			**2022**			**2023**		
Country of Citizenship	**Total**	Male	Female	**Total**	Male	Female	**Total**	Male	Female
Russia	**66786**	25170	41616	**151049**	75060	75989	**102585**	46779	55806
Ukraine	**23377**	5225	18152	**50357**	13977	36380	**40483**	11463	29020
Total Foreign Population	**1792036**	890857	901179	**1823836**	902124	921712	**1570543**	762672	807871

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), https://www.tuik.gov.tr/Home/Index

Prior to the waves of emigration after 2022, the gender composition of both Russian community in Turkey skewed towards females compared to males, as illustrated in Table 1. Indeed, the shock wave and the wave after sanctions and relocation were relatively balanced in terms of gender, often involving entire families with children and pets. The third wave, triggered by Putin's announcement of partial mobilization, has predominantly comprised young males. But many of these individuals later brought their families, leading to a more balanced gender distribution, as seen in Table 1.

Table 2: Top Five Provinces of Russian citizens Residence (2021-2023)

	Russia		
Provinces	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Antalya	29691	57202	35288
Istanbul	14269	40243	23599

Mersin	8041	17731	18913
Bursa	5088	9115	9685
Muğla	1973	8428	3332

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), https://www.tuik.gov.tr/Home/Index

Table 2 shows that the top five provinces favored by Russians have remained unchanged throughout the past three years (2021-2023). Antalya and Istanbul emerged as the leading destinations for Russian citizens, both experiencing reductions in 2023 after significant growth in 2022; while Antalya, located on the Mediterranean Sea, is preferred for its luxury tourist resorts, Istanbul attracts Russians seeking economic opportunities and cultural diversity with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and vibrant urban life, featuring significant Russian communities in both cities. Alongside Mersin and Bursa, which exhibited consistent growth as seen in Table 2, Muğla maintained its position as the fifth-ranked province. However, its attractive coastal resorts and luxury marinas, particularly in the holiday districts of Bodrum and Marmaris on the Aegean Sea, resulted in a remarkable sevenfold increase in the number of Russians, including oligarchs and digital nomads, hosted in 2022. Notably, the cities of Istanbul, Antalya, and Bursa align with the preferences of White Russians in the 1920s.

Return Migration: Reevaluating the Prospect of Returning to Russia

A noticeable trend among some Russian emigrants, particularly those who left at the onset of the war, is the reconsideration of their decision to stay abroad and the contemplation of return migration. Initially, many viewed their relocation to countries like Turkey as a temporary solution, expecting the situation in Russia to stabilize swiftly. Return migration is driven by various factors, such as job opportunities, and a renewed sense of hope for Russia's future. Nevertheless, the process of reintegration is fraught with challenges. One of the primary obstacles is the political climate in Russia, especially for those who were vocal in their opposition to the war or who faced repression. As a result, return migration is often a complex and emotionally charged decision, marked by both external uncertainties and internal conflicts over how to re-enter a society that may no longer welcome them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Russian diaspora has undergone significant transformations over the decades, shaped by political upheaval, economic shifts, and the changing nature of state repression. From the mass displacements during Stalin's reign to the waves of migration following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the patterns of Russian migration have continually adapted to both domestic and global developments. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has added a new chapter to this ongoing narrative, with increasing numbers of Russian emigrants arriving in Turkey, among other destinations. These dynamics reflect broader trends in the intersection of migration, politics, and national identity, highlighting Turkey's role as a growing hub for Russian communities. This article contributes to filling this gap, as the development and historical transformation of the Russian diaspora in Turkey have not been thoroughly explored in the existing literature, and a comprehensive analysis of its evolution remains largely absent.

Future research could explore several avenues: examining the lived experiences of Russians in Turkey, including the intersection of cultural, political, and social identity within diaspora communities; investigating the role of Russia's growing authoritarianism in shaping migration patterns and diasporic activism; and analyzing the specific ways in which the Turkish government engages with and responds to this influx of Russian emigrants, particularly in light of recent political tensions and the economic opportunities they present. Additionally, comparative studies on Russian diaspora communities in different countries could provide deeper insights into the varying impacts of migration policies and international relations on these populations.

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