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# FRIEND OR FOE?

## PERCEPTIONS OF, AND AMONG, RUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN GEORGIA

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## **ABOUT CRRC-GEORGIA**

CRRC-Georgia is a non-profit research organization which provides good data for public good. The organization's mission is to promote evidence-based discussions on pressing societal issues by producing reliable, up-to-date, and accessible data and analysis.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the onset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, over 1.2 million Russian citizens have crossed Georgia’s borders, with some en route to a third destination and others choosing to stay.<sup>1</sup> Although many left Russia in protest of the war in Ukraine - or to avoid the country’s “partial mobilization” - their reception in Georgia among locals has been mixed.<sup>2</sup> Even before the conflict, it was not rare to find graffiti-tagged walls declaring Russia as Georgia’s occupier, while others project expletives directed at Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin.

Much of this resentment stems from Russia’s occupation and support of the break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and its invasion of Georgia in 2008. The pretext of war in the country, followed by an influx of Russian citizens after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, leads to an interesting juxtaposition for those relocating to Georgia. Despite the migrants’ departure from Russia, are they considered an extension of the country by Georgian locals? How does this affect their ability to integrate to their new home, and to what extent do they intend to do so? This article analyzes survey data probing Russian and Georgian opinions and perceptions of Russian migrants in the country, the impact of their resettlement, and their ability to integrate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kvatchadze, „რუსეთიდან საქართველოში 1.2 მილიონი მოქალაქე შემოვიდა - 9 თვის მონაცემები.“ 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Silagadze, “How do Georgians feel about the influx of Russians?” 2023.

<sup>3</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “Survey of Russian Emigrants.” 2023.

## A HOSTILE LEGACY

Russian migrants in Georgia find themselves in a peculiar position. Although many oppose the War in Ukraine, criticize Putin's regime, or fleeing military mobilization, they are still in a country that was invaded by Russia only a little over a decade ago.<sup>4</sup> Despite these migrants' espousal of liberal beliefs, their reception among Georgians has been mixed, with many labeled as war-time tourists in the country.<sup>5</sup> Further complicating relations are class divisions and a widely- shared understanding of Russia as a colonizing power and its citizens as colonizers.<sup>6</sup> With the relocation of over 100,000 Russian migrants to Georgia in 2022 alone, such feelings have intensified.<sup>7</sup>

Adding to existing tension, many of the migrants have resettled in population centers such as Tbilisi and Batumi but continue to work remotely in companies based in their home country, earning salaries that far outsize those attainable to most locals, which inflates living costs.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Georgia's lax immigration policies not only allows Russian citizens to enter the country without a visa for up to one year, it also allows them to work or establish businesses with little regulation. Business-minded transplants have opened restaurants, bars, cafes, art studios, and various other ventures which cater largely to a Russophone clientele, alienating many Georgian speakers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Prashizky, "Living in limbo." 2023. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Korableva, Jonutyte, Silvan. "Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War in Ukraine." 2023. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Korableva, Jonutyte, Silvan. "Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War in Ukraine." 2023. 3-4.

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<sup>8</sup> Korableva, Jonutyte, Silvan. "Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War in Ukraine." 2023. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Korableva, Jonutyte, Silvan. "Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War in Ukraine." 2023. 3-4.

The arrival of migrant workers and the purchase of property by foreigners is not a new phenomenon in Georgia. In 2019, 69% of all real estate purchases were made by foreigners, for example.<sup>10</sup> Even before the war, Russian citizens critical of their government began relocating to Georgia, citing deteriorating political conditions in their country.<sup>11</sup> The procurement of property by foreigners provides further stress to an economy already witnessing immense wealth stratification, while offering an easy-to-distinguish culprit for financial stress.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, use of the Georgian language, or lack thereof, provides a clear distinction between local and foreigner. Although some migrants claim it is not necessary to learn the language due to many Georgians' proficiency in Russian and/or English, it highlights an audible division between the groups, especially as locals perceive the migrants' presence to be colonial in nature.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the language's [Russian's] use in the country has grown increasingly political and is associated with support of the Russian state.<sup>14</sup> This contentiousness has even led some Georgian business owners to bar its use.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gogsadze, Dolbaia, Sitchinava. "The main peculiarities of labor migrants' integration in Georgia." 2022. 167.

<sup>11</sup> Gogsadze, Dolbaia, Sitchinava. "The main peculiarities of labor migrants' integration in Georgia." 2022. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Chilichava, "რა გავლენა იქონია რუსი მიგრანტების შემოსვლამ საქართველოს ეკონომიკაზე?" 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Gogsadze, Dolbaia, Sitchinava. "The main peculiarities of labor migrants' integration in Georgia." 2022. 170.

<sup>14</sup> Mitaishvili-Rayyis, "Shifting Attitudes Towards the Russian Language in Georgia." 2023. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Korableva, Jonutyte, Silvan. "Domestic and International Reverberations from Russia's War in Ukraine." 2023. 4.

## GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIAN MIGRANTS AMONG GEORGIANS

Survey data shows that most Georgians (66%) believe Russia is the country's greatest enemy.<sup>16</sup> While this conclusion may be true for many, survey results gathered in October 2023 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) Georgia provides varied perspectives on the presence of Russian people in the country. The NED 2023 New Political Party and Attitudes Towards Russian Citizens October 2023 survey - conducted in Georgian with 1,278 residents from Tbilisi, other urban areas, and rural settlements, excluding the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - asked a variety of questions probing Georgian citizens' feelings towards this group of migrants.<sup>17</sup>

Asked "how much do you trust or distrust the Russian citizens who left Russia?", 71% of respondents indicated either "fully" or "rather" distrusting them, while 17% indicated, fully or rather, trusting of them. People aged 35-54 expressed the highest levels of distrust towards Russian migrants, at 66%. Only 20% of those in the youngest age-group indicated some level of trust. Those 18-34 distrust Russian citizens at about the same frequency at 65%. Trust was highest among those 55+, at 26%, while, still, a majority (57%) expressed some level of distrust.

Interestingly, one's sex was also associated with levels of trust. 76% of women claimed to distrust the migrants, almost 10 percentage points more than men (67%), while 23% and 13%, respectively, report a degree of trust.<sup>18</sup>

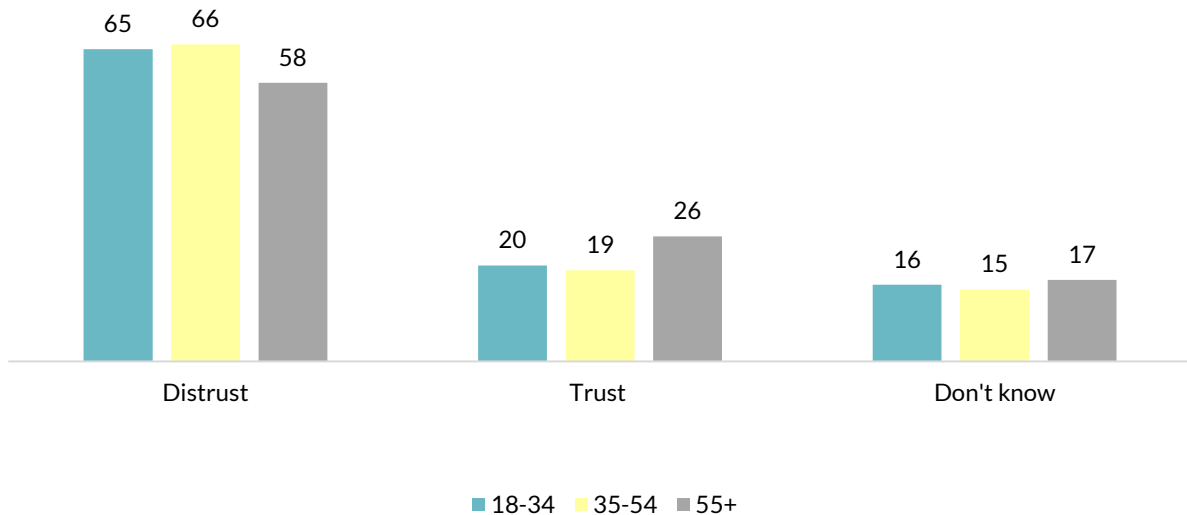
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<sup>16</sup> CRRC Georgia, "Caucasus Barometer 2021 Georgia" 2022.

<sup>17</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. "NED 2023 ახალი პოლიტიკური პარტია და დამოკიდებულებები რუსეთის მოქალაქეები მიმართ ოქტომბერი 2023." Oct. 2023.

<sup>18</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. "NED 2023 ახალი პოლიტიკური პარტია და დამოკიდებულებები რუსეთის მოქალაქეები მიმართ ოქტომბერი 2023." Oct. 2023.

**Figure 1: “How much do you trust/distrust – the Russian citizens who left Russia?” (%)**, NED 2023 New Political Party and Attitudes Towards Russian Citizens, October 2023.



**Note:** By age group. Trust combines “rather trust”, and “fully trust” answers. Distrust combines “rather distrust” and “fully distrust” answers.

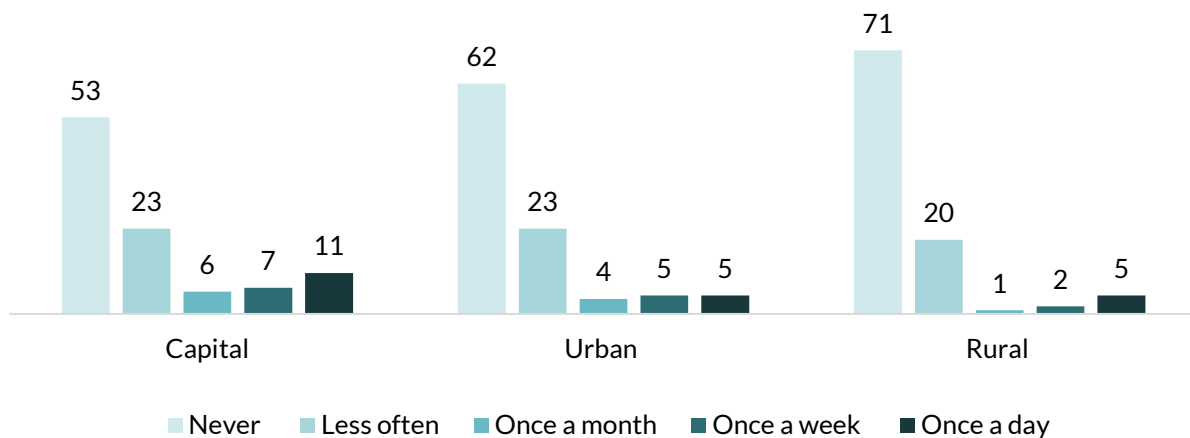
Aside from trust, opinion on politically contentious issues in Georgia – such as Russian citizen’s right to work, buy property, and enter the country without a visa – were probed. Overall, 81% of Georgians agree that Russian citizens should not be permitted to purchase property in the country. 72% believe that a visa should be required for [Russian citizens] to enter the country. Regarding their right to work in the country, Georgians were more split, with a slight majority (52%) dissenting and 41% approving of their current right to work in Georgia.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “NED 2023 ახალი პოლიტიკური პარტია და დამოკიდებულებები რუსეთის მოქალაქეები მიმართ ოქტომბერი 2023.” Oct. 2023.



Important to consider when prompting respondents to express their attitudes towards Russian migrants is the degree of contact they have with them. Thus, participants were asked, “how often do you have contact with the Russian citizens who came to Georgia.” A majority (62%) of respondents claimed to never have contact. One’s location of residence (i.e., capital, urban, or rural) impacts their likelihood of contact most notably.<sup>20</sup>

*Figure 2: “How often do you have contact with the Russian citizens who came to Georgia?” (%), NED 2023 New Political Party and Attitudes Towards Russian Citizens, October 2023*

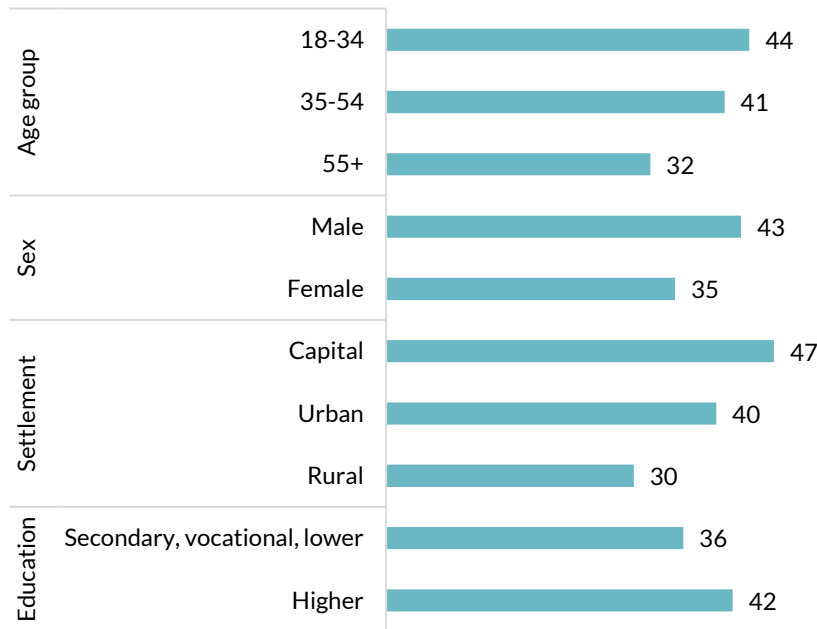


**Note:** By settlement type.

Those living in the capital, Tbilisi, most often have daily contact with Russian citizens, 11%, while only 5% of those in urban or rural locales report the same. Overall, a majority of respondents in the capital, urban, and rural settlements “never” have contact with Russian migrants, 53%, 62%, and 71%, respectively. Other demographic variables are further associated with one’s likelihood of having contact with this population.

<sup>20</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “NED 2023 ახალი პოლიტიკური პარტია და დამოკიდებულებები რუსეთის მოქალაქეები მიმართ ოქტომბერი 2023.” Oct. 2023.

**Figure 3: “How often do you have contact with the Russian citizens who came to Georgia?” (Predicted probabilities), NED 2023 New Political Party and Attitudes Towards Russian Citizens, October 2023.**



**Note:** The analysis includes sex (male, female), age group (18-34, 35-54, and 55+), settlement type (capital, urban, rural), and education (secondary/ secondary technical/ lower, and tertiary) as predictor variables.

Logistic regression analysis demonstrates that 18-34 year-olds, males, those residing in the capital, and those with a university education are most likely to have contact with Russian migrants. Expectedly, as Tbilisi has been one of the primary destinations for migrants, where one lives is most strongly associated with contact, as those living in the capital are 18 points more likely to have at least some degree of contact than those in rural communities. Although young people (18-34) most frequently report not trusting Russians, they are simultaneously the age group most likely to have contact. Furthermore, ethnic minorities are 13 points more likely than ethnic Georgians to have contact with the migrants<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “NED 2023 ახალი პოლიტიკური პარტია და დამოკიდებულებები რუსეთის მოქალაქეები მიმართ ოქტომბერი 2023.” Oct. 2023.

## PERSPECTIVE FROM MIGRANTS

Trust among Georgians towards Russian migrants may be low, however over 1,000 Russians polled do not mirror the feelings of locals. Although non-representative, a survey conducted by CRRC Georgia in the spring of 2023 provides valuable context to Russians' perspectives and attitudes around their own feelings of place and integration in Georgia. Among the approximately 1,000 migrants polled, 72% expressed at least some degree of trust towards Georgians, far from the 17% of Georgians that feel the same. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters (74%) of survey participants expressed at least some degree of satisfaction with their life in Georgia, while only 5% claimed to be dissatisfied.<sup>22</sup>

Survey findings also confirm the anti-war and anti-government stance of many Russian migrants, among those polled. 58% reported migrating to Georgia due to Russia's war in Ukraine. Another 69% identified the political situation in Russia as reason for leaving. Only 1% of those polled approved of Vladimir Putin, while 72% disapproved. Remaining participants either chose to not provide an answer or ended their interview before the question was asked.<sup>23</sup>

Migrants' motivations for choosing Georgia as their destination vary among those polled. More than a quarter (27%) indicate doing so as they feel more secure in Georgia. This is followed by affordability of life in the country (16%). Third, Georgia's geographic proximity to Russia was a primary influence on their decision, among 15% surveyed. Eight percent of those polled report the ease of starting a business in Georgia as a motivator.<sup>24</sup>

Despite many opposing Russia's government, however, the migrants polled confirmed a degree of tension between themselves and locals. Questioned the following, "Have you experienced problems – condemnation or discrimination of Russians?", 32% polled confirmed they had.

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<sup>22</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. "Survey of Russian Emigrants." 2023.

<sup>23</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. "Survey of Russian Emigrants." 2023.

<sup>24</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. "Survey of Russian Emigrants." 2023.

However, when queried “how physically safe or unsafe do you feel in Georgia?”, 90% confirmed feeling safe.<sup>25</sup>

Although the migrants polled reported experiences of discrimination due to their nationality, a majority (57%) claim to have made friends with a local in Georgia. Additionally, 31% stated having daily communication with locals, 26% suggested communicating with them at least once a week, and 11% claimed only once a month. 4% of survey respondents answered never having contact with Georgians.

Lacking proficiency in the Georgian language may be one reason for those polled limiting their communication with locals. More than half (71%) of respondents indicate knowing only a few words that they can regularly use in the language. This is followed by 15% of those polled claiming to have a basic level of comprehension in Georgian. Asked further if they would continue studying the language, 67% confirmed, yes.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “Survey of Russian Emigrants.” 2023.

<sup>26</sup> CRRC Georgia, NED. “Survey of Russian Emigrants.” 2023.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russian migrants in Georgia are in a somewhat precarious position. Despite those surveyed proclaiming to be anti-war, they are in a country Russia had invaded only a little over a decade ago. Confirmed by Georgians surveyed, Russia's legacy in the country translates to a low degree of trust towards its citizens who have migrated there, while potentially encouraging locals to self-segregate from the migrants.

Contradicting Georgian's high degree of distrust towards them, however, Russian migrants surveyed tend to trust locals, even despite reported instances of harassment due to their nationality. While a majority of Georgians report never having contact with migrants, a large portion of Russian migrants surveyed report otherwise. Furthermore, a majority of the migrants feel safe in their newfound community.

The degree to which Russian migrants feel truly integrated into Georgian society (or if that is something which they aspire towards) may not be entirely clear from survey results. However, demonstrated are attitudes that confirm mixed reception of Russians in the country. While Georgia's objectionable visitors may hold more positive perceptions of their reluctant hosts, evident is a stark divide between the two, which many appear hesitant to bridge.

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