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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discordant privilege

Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan

Eugenia PESCI
University of Bologna
University of Helsinki

Margarita ZAVADSKAYA
Finnish Institute for International Affairs
University of Helsinki

Abstract
Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered an unprecedented wave of emigration, reshaping mobility patterns across Eurasia. The relocation of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens has generated an important body of empirical work on post-2022 emigration. This article examines the case of Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan through the analysis of 17 in-depth interviews conducted remotely with Russian citizens residing in Bishkek. Bringing together Bourdieusian approaches to migrant capital and the aspirations–capabilities framework with postcolonial and lifestyle migration scholarship, we develop the concept of discordant privilege to capture the coexistence of structural advantage and lived precarity in migrants' experiences. We show how simplified entry and legalization pathways, the widespread use of the Russian language in Bishkek, and Kyrgyzstan's comparatively low cost of living facilitated settlement, while limited financial resources, uneven capital convertibility, and employment disruptions generated economic strain, shaping migrants' capabilities and aspirations for further mobility. Finally, migrants' "gaze" on Kyrgyzstan as peripheral illuminates the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies and the asymmetric stratification of mobility within the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan; Russian migrants; class; privilege; postcolonial migration

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent announcement of a partial military mobilization in Russia triggered the largest exodus of Russian citizens since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This emigration has been described as political (Kamalov et al. 2022) and war-induced (Zavadskaya 2023). While the initial, post-February 2022 wave was composed of largely politically active professionals — journalists, academics, and activists — subsequent waves also included draft evaders, individuals fleeing economic instability, and those escaping intensifying political repression (Exodus-22 2023). This massive exodus of Russian citizens can be compared to historical emigrations following the 1917 revolution (Raeff 1990) or the USSR's dissolution (Tishkov et al. 2005), as well as to other politically motivated waves of emigration such as those from Cuba (Colomer 2000) or Iran (Michaelsen 2018).

Most existing research on post-2022 Russian emigration has concentrated on migrants settling in relatively popular destinations such as Georgia, Armenia, or countries appealing to digital nomads. Russian migrants are portrayed as young, politically engaged, highly

CONTACT Eugenia Pesci, eugenia.pesci@helsinki.fi, Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Finland.

educated, and economically privileged professionals. Commonly referred to as "*relokanty*", these individuals relocated primarily from Russia's major cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and were already embedded in global labor markets and activist networks (Figari Barberis & Zanatta 2024; Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Zavadskaya et al., 2024; Bronnikova et al. 2025). Less scholarly attention has been directed toward the experiences of Russian migrants originating from working-class backgrounds, smaller regional centres, or ethnic minorities, who remain comparatively invisible in public discourse and digital research networks (Jonutytė 2023; Baranova 2024a). Likewise, limited research addresses the experiences of Russian migrants relocating to less prestigious or less economically attractive destinations, particularly Central Asian countries and Mongolia. By focusing primarily on politically active migrants, IT specialists, and the "creative class" as a rather homogeneous group, existing scholarship has tended to ignore the substantial socio-economic disparities among them, including the structural factors shaping their migration choices and the resources they possess and are able to mobilize before, during, and after migration (De Haas 2010, 2021).

Building on critical migration scholarship on class, privilege, and aspirations–capabilities, we develop an analytical framework that foregrounds internal class differentiation among Russian migrants while situating their mobility within the postcolonial legacies and enduring hierarchies of the Eurasian space (Kluczewska 2024). Engaging with debates on privilege in migration (Robertson & Roberts 2022) and discordant lifestyle mobilities (Botterill 2017), we introduce the concept of discordant privilege to capture how Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan may simultaneously experience structural advantages and forms of insecurity. This lens highlights how privilege and precarity are co-produced through unequal mobility regimes and postcolonial hierarchies that shape mobility outcomes.

Drawing on seventeen semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and December 2023 within the framework of the "Building an Anti-War Common in the Russian Migrant Community" project (Smyth et al. 2024), this article provides an insightful case for understanding the link between class, privilege, and mobility in the post-Soviet space. The case of Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan offers a critical case for unpacking the concept of discordant privilege in the context of a contested Eurasian "borderland", where cognitive, physical, and political borders are constantly (re-)enforced and erased at the same time (Ceccorulli et al. 2025, inthis Special Issue) and where unequal power dynamics still shape economic and political relations, as well as people's mobility and citizenship rights.

Russian emigration post-February 2022

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, followed by the announcement of partial mobilization in September of the same year, triggered one of the largest waves of Russian emigration in recent history. Estimates talk about an initial outflow of between 820 and 920 thousand people (Zavadskaya 2025), and it is estimated that 650 thousand remain abroad (Krawatzek & Sasse 2024). This is widely recognized as the most substantial "brain drain" since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kamalov et al. 2022; Korobkov et al. 2022). The initial wave, which began shortly after the invasion, consisted of politically engaged individuals including journalists, academics, activists, and members of the non-parliamentary opposition. Many of them left due to ideological opposition to the war and the Putin regime, continuing their political engagement abroad through anti-war activism and transnational mobilization (Luchenko & Shamiev 2024). Repressive measures inside Russia, including arrests, threats, and surveillance, intensified the urgency of departure. At the same time, sanctions, business disruptions, and professional uncertainty acted as additional push factors. Some relocated through corporate channels, especially in the IT

sector. This is why the term *relokant*, from the English verb "to relocate" has gained traction to describe Russian migrants in general (Figari Barberis & Zanatta 2024).

The second major wave occurred after the September 2022 announcement of a partial military mobilization, spurring a mass exodus of young men avoiding conscription. Unlike the earlier wave, this group was less politically homogeneous, including individuals motivated by fear of conscription, familial obligations, and pragmatic considerations due to sanctions. As time passed, the line between politically-motivated, mobilization-induced, and economic migration blurred even further, revealing the complexity of circumstances and motivations underpinning the decision to leave Russia (Vorobeva 2023). With regards to Russian migration to Central Asia, scholars have pointed that this has been significantly influenced by economic and social factors, rather than by political motivations (Dadabaev et al. 2025).

Despite the differences in motivations, Russian migrants are depicted as a rather homogeneous group of young, educated, highly skilled professionals belonging to the middle and upper-middle class. Most respondents in the OutRush project and the Exodus-22 survey were between 20 and 40 years old, with higher education, managerial experience, and employment in sectors such as IT, data science, and the arts (Baranova & Podolsky 2024). In Exodus-22's sample, 40 percent of respondents were IT specialists, and 42 percent reported having sufficient savings to sustain themselves for up to a year without employment (Exodus-22 2023). Overall, these studies reveal that, on average, Russian migrants are younger, better educated, and financially better-off than the average Russian citizen. For these reasons, some studies have drawn parallels between these individuals and lifestyle migrants (Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Baranova & Podolsky 2024). Indeed, Russian migrants' spending power and remote jobs in high-paying sectors have often allowed them to live independently from local labor markets and avoid downward social mobility.

In terms of destinations, neighboring Georgia and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were among the top choices for Russian migrants (Krawatzek & Sasse 2024). Countries such as Türkiye and Israel, alongside Serbia (see Zejnulahović et al. 2024), various EU states, and digital nomad hubs like Bali and Thailand (see Baranova & Podolsky 2023) also saw an influx of Russian citizens. Latin America, particularly Argentina and Brazil, attracted several thousands of Russian migrants due to the possibility to give birth and obtain citizenship thanks to *jus soli*, an example of transnational birth mobility (see Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Ruseishvili 2025). After the announcement of the partial mobilization Armenia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia witnessed a sharp rise in incoming Russian migrants. Legal regimes across these countries — especially those within the EAEU — facilitated relatively easy entry for Russian citizens with just an internal passport. Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan initially welcomed Russian professionals, particularly in the tech sector (Poghosyan 2023), even though the massive arrival of Russians sparked debate regarding the use of Russian language and the legacies of Russian imperialism, especially in Kazakhstan (Darchiashvili et al. 2024). In early 2023, Kazakhstan revised its migration policy, limiting visa-free stays for EAEU nationals to 90 days within any 180-day period (Sahadeo 2024). Mongolia introduced temporary residency permits for ethnic minority Russians fleeing conscription (Lkhaajav 2022). In contrast, Georgia's stance has been more ambivalent: while its visa policy remains liberal, allowing Russian nationals to reside in the country for up to one year, widespread public opposition framed Russian arrivals as politically controversial (Chumburidze & Gavrilova 2023). Across various host countries, the arrival of Russian migrants has significantly impacted local economies and social cohesion. On the one hand, migrants' relatively high spending power and consumer practices, such as increased demand for

housing, transport, restaurants, and banking services, have contributed to GDP growth (Sahadeo 2024). On the other hand, this has caused a surge in living costs, particularly in the housing market (Darieva et al. 2025). In Tbilisi, property prices rose by 46% between early 2022 and September of the same year (Seskuria 2023). Prices' rise has further intensified tensions between residents and newcomers (Kuleshova et al. 2023; Seskuria 2023).

These general dynamics set the stage for understanding how Russian mobility has taken shape in specific receiving contexts. Kyrgyzstan offers a revealing case for analyzing the entanglement of class, privilege, and the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies in shaping mobility in Eurasia. In what follows, we turn to the specific political, economic, and social conditions shaping Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan.

Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), is a lower-middle-income country in Central Asia where poverty and limited employment opportunities remain persistent challenges. Since the early 2000s, these conditions have driven sustained large-scale labour emigration, primarily to the Russian Federation. Remittances play a crucial role in the national economy, accounting for nearly one-third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and constituting a vital source of household income (Bossavie & Garrote-Sánchez 2022). Visa-free access within the EAEU, well-developed transport links, and enduring cultural and linguistic ties rooted in the Soviet period continue to facilitate migration to Russia, which remains the principal destination for Kyrgyz labor migrants despite the recent tightening of Russian migration policies. Although the number of officially registered Kyrgyz migrants in Russia declined from an estimated 750,000 in previous years to approximately 377,000 in 2025 (IOM 2025), it is still estimated that around one million Kyrgyz citizens are engaged in labor migration abroad, either temporarily or on a long-term basis, with the majority working in Russia (Prague Process 2024).

Russia plays a major economic role in Kyrgyzstan beyond migration. The economic relations between the two countries have always been strong, but they reached new heights after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia became Kyrgyzstan's second-largest investor after China, accounting for 24.2 percent of total foreign direct investment in the first half of 2024 (Osmonalieva 2024b). Kyrgyzstan's imports from Russia also saw a mild but stable increase, while Kyrgyzstan's exports to Russia jumped from 425 million USD in 2021 to a peak of 1.07 billion in 2022, before dropping to 743 million in 2023 (Putz 2025). The economic rise experienced by Kyrgyzstan in recent years has been driven by cross-border trade and currency inflows, mainly from Russia, for which Kyrgyzstan is suspected to help Russia in bypassing sanctions by re-exporting goods (Lahiri 2024). Moreover, Russia and Kyrgyzstan are actively cooperating for the creation of technology parks to attract greater Russian investment in the country. Currently, 40 joint projects in industrial cooperation and import substitution are underway, while around 700 joint ventures and 300 Russian-owned firms are already operating in the country (Osmonalieva 2024a).

Although the presence of Russian-speaking minorities and ethnic Russians in the country has been steadily declining since the early 90's, the Russian language continues to play a notable role in Kyrgyzstan's social and cultural landscape. As of 2022, ethnic Russians made up roughly 5 percent of the population, concentrated in Bishkek, the Chui region, and around the Issyk-Kul Lake (Agadjanian & Oh 2020). Russian-speaking migration to the region dates back to Tsarist colonization and was intensified during the Soviet era through resettlement programs, mass deportations, and industrial development projects (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008). Despite ongoing state-led efforts to promote the Kyrgyz language, Russian remains an official language and is widely used in daily communication, education, and business,

particularly in urban centers (Agadjanian & Nedoluzhko 2022). Data from 2011 and 2017 indicate that Russian-language proficiency correlates with higher earnings, particularly for men (Agadjanian & Oh 2020).

Despite its small size and lack of land border with Russia, Kyrgyzstan has seen a notable rise in arrivals of Russian citizens since the start of the full-scale invasion. There were around 446,600 entries from Russia to Kyrgyzstan in 2022 according to data from the Russian Federal Security Service, an all-time record (Kaktus Media 2023). Even though the majority of Russian nationals who entered Kyrgyzstan used it as a transit hub, by the end of 2024, 12,600 Russian citizens had obtained permanent residence, while more than 6,000 had acquired Kyrgyzstan's citizenship (Current Time 2024). Several factors facilitated this influx, including visa-free entry with an internal passport, the availability of direct flights from major Russian cities, the use of the Russian language, and Kyrgyzstan's comparatively low cost of living. Together, these conditions positioned Kyrgyzstan as a key transit and relocation hub for Russian migrants.

Kyrgyzstan's leadership has expressed an accommodative position towards the influx of Russian migrants. President Sadyr Japarov publicly affirmed that Russian migrants were free to work in the country and emphasized that Kyrgyzstan was "benefiting, not suffering" from their presence (Radio Azattyk 2022). Kyrgyz authorities made targeted efforts to attract Russian business owners and digital nomads. In 2022, the Kyrgyz government launched a Digital Nomad pilot program, allowing foreign IT professionals to reside in the country while working remotely (Kudryavtseva 2022). This status was subsequently formalized in 2025 through the legal recognition of digital nomads (The Astana Times 2025). These measures formed part of broader state initiatives aimed at promoting the domestic IT sector and attracting foreign — including Russian — investment. They were especially appealing to Russian entrepreneurs and professionals seeking a location in which to maintain business operations after losing access to Western markets due to sanctions. Kyrgyzstan's integration into international banking systems, following the suspension of Visa and Mastercard services in Russia in March 2022, further enhanced its attractiveness as a relocation destination for Russian businesses.

At the same time, the increasing number of incoming Russian citizens — many of whom were men fleeing conscription — placed Kyrgyzstan in a politically sensitive position. While authorities framed the presence of Russian professionals and businesses as an economic opportunity to boost the local economy, the fact that many of them were draft evaders could be regarded as controversial by the Kremlin. This may have influenced the subsequent shift toward more restrictive entry regulations. Following an initial period of permissive entry arrangements, Kyrgyz authorities — much like their counterparts in Kazakhstan — began revising visa-free stay policies. Initially Russian citizens could stay in Kyrgyzstan without registration for 30 days and extend their stay up to six months for private purposes. After this period, many Russian migrants living in the country resorted to "visa runs," briefly exiting and re-entering Kyrgyzstan to reset their stay period. However, in September 2024, the Kyrgyz government revised its entry and visa-free stay policies, including for citizens of EAEU member states. Under the new rules, EAEU nationals are allowed to stay in the country for 90 days within a 180-day period (Ministry of Digital Development of the Kyrgyz Republic 2024). Kyrgyzstan thus tried to balance between supporting domestic economic interests and maintaining its strategic alliance with Russia. This ambivalence has been particularly evident in its treatment of Russian anti-war activists. Notably, Kyrgyzstan has been cooperating with Russian authorities in sharing personal data and, in some cases, detaining and extraditing dissidents and political activists (Rickleton 2023).

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped mobility dynamics across Eurasia. Countries that were historically labor exporters to Russia have also become destination and

transit countries, with important implications for their economies, labor markets, societies, and relations with Russia. Within this context, scholars of both area studies and critical migration have begun to seek new approaches to understanding these new mobilities, including the adoption of postcolonial lenses (Baranova 2024b; Kluczewska 2024) and approaches sensitive to imperial legacies in the region (Amelina et al. 2025). Nevertheless, there remains an analytical gap in understanding the class dimension of such mobilities and how macro-structural factors shape Russian migrants' capabilities and aspirations, to overcome simplistic accounts of privilege *versus* precarity.

Class, capabilities, and aspirations in migration

Although international migration has often been examined in relation to unequal and unjust distributions of resources and opportunities, these discussions have largely framed such disparities as global inequalities rather than through the lens of class (Rye 2019). The significance of class in migration studies has been overshadowed by other social differentiations such as ethnicity, gender, and religion (Van Hear 2014). Nonetheless, class has a critical role in migrants' capacities to mobilize resources and navigate new socio-economic and cultural contexts, as they inhabit unstable, multilocal class positions (Erel 2010; Van Hear 2014; Barglowski 2019; Rye 2019; Weiss 2005, 2006).

Some critical migration scholars have adopted a Bourdieusian class analysis to explore the role of different forms of capital in migration (Van Hear 2014; Erel 2010; Oliver & O' Reilly 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). According to Bourdieu (1985), social stratification results from the persistence of class hierarchies, imbalanced power structures, oppression, and the uneven distribution of resources that can be transformed into capital. Scholars distinguish between economic capital, comprising wealth and financial resources; cultural capital, which includes one's education background, knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies; and social capital, which refers to the quantity and quality of networks, relationships, and social connections. Resources may or may not become capital depending on their value and recognition in specific social contexts and on their degree of convertibility. Migrants' capital is thus context-dependent: resources accumulated in one socio-spatial setting may be valued, devalued, or rendered ambivalent when migrants cross borders (Erel 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). This creates fragmented or mismatched capitals, as migrants' resources do not seamlessly translate into recognized value in all social fields. Gains in the field of work may coexist with losses in the fields of citizenship and family, or vice versa (Erel & Ryan 2019). Using capital as an analytical tool therefore highlights how macro-level factors can simultaneously elevate and undermine migrants' social positioning.

Building on these insights, this article also engages with de Haas's aspirations–capabilities framework (de Haas 2021), which conceptualizes migration as the outcome of the interaction between migrants' aspirations to move and their capabilities to realize these aspirations. According to de Haas (2021:17), migration aspirations are "a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures", while capabilities are "contingent on positive ('freedom to') and negative ('freedom from') liberties". Rather than treating migration solely as a response to deprivation or opportunity, this framework highlights how mobility is shaped by differentiated access to resources and how macro-level factors affect agency in migration. We thus approach migrants' capabilities and aspirations as classed and historically situated in postcolonial hierarchies.

Postcolonial Migration and Discordant Privilege

Literature on postcolonial migration has shown how colonial legacies and neocolonial power relations between the Global North and the Global South shape the perception and valuation of mobile subjects: people moving from the Global North to the Global South often

frame themselves and are described in the media as 'expats' rather than labor migrants, since the term 'migrant' is seen as carrying negative connotations undermining middle-class personal and professional identities (Weiss 2005). Regardless of qualifications, they tend to benefit from higher labor market positions in the new context, due to perceptions of higher professionalism associated with whiteness. At the same time, individuals from the Global South face systemic devaluation of their skills when moving to the Global North (Erel 2010; Åkesson 2016; Augusto et al. 2020; Åkesson 2021; Adamson 2024). Recent scholarship has illustrated the coloniality of contemporary regimes of mobility and the highly racialized definition of migrants' skills by examining North–South migration patterns (Åkesson 2016; Hayes & Pérez-Gañan 2017; Augusto & King 2019; Åkesson 2021). The concept of reciprocal migration (Augusto et al. 2022), although meant to capture the two-way flows between former colonies and metropoles, hides asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in these exchanges. Global North migrants in former colonies enjoy unearned privileges due to their perceived higher cultural and symbolic capital, while at the same time migrants and students from former colonies working and studying in former imperial metropoles face systemic discrimination and devaluation of their skills and competencies. This reinforces the argument that migration systems remain marked by coloniality.

Within the scholarly work on postcolonial migration, an important body of literature has focused on forms of middle-class lifestyle mobilities, tackling the central topics of privilege (Benson 2014) and geographic arbitrage, defined as migrants' ability to leverage their economic and symbolic status to relocate to regions with lower living costs, thereby improving their quality of life (Hayes 2014; Hayes & Pérez-Gañán 2017). Nonetheless, some scholars have noticed that privilege and geographic arbitrage are often experienced hand in hand with increasing labor precarity and downward social mobility in migrants' home countries, as well as insecurity in destination countries due to weaker social safety nets (Botterill 2017; Robertson & Roberts 2022; Mancinelli & Molz 2024). Botterill (2017) and Mancinelli & Molz (2024) use the concept of discordance to describe the experience of simultaneous privilege and precarity experienced by white middle-class migrants in the Global South, as their mobility exposes them to new vulnerabilities related to citizenship rights, financial instability, and uncertain social protection in the new country.

Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan reflects patterns of postcolonial and middle-class lifestyle migration when compared to the inverse dynamic of Central Asian labor migration to Russia. Migrants from Central Asia, including from Kyrgyzstan, are commonly perceived by Russian society and framed by officials as low-skilled manual workers with limited education and insufficient command of the Russian language (Kuznetsova & Round 2019). They must navigate a complex socio-political landscape marked by institutional discrimination, racism, precarity, and legal exclusion (Heusala & Aitamurto 2017; Urinboyev & Polese 2018; Kuznetsova & Round 2019). They also have to deal with the costs, both formal and informal, of migration legalization and its constantly changing rules, increasing control, and punitive measures (Schenk 2018), threatened by the fear of deportation and re-entry bans (Reeves 2015). Moreover, racialized stereotypes render them simultaneously essential as low-wage laborers and undesirable as cultural outsiders. Media, politicians, and even legal frameworks reinforce their portrayal as "dangerous", "uncivilized", or "unassimilable" (Kuznetsova & Round 2019). Even when formally naturalized, they continue to face discrimination, as the citizenship they acquire is often segmented and conditional, a"subaltern citizenship"that legally incorporates racialized migrants while maintaining their marginalization and policing their loyalty to the Russian state (Bahovadinova 2024; Bahovadinova & Borisova 2025).

This asymmetry illustrates the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies in the Eurasian space in terms of mobility and citizenship rights, despite the formal absence of colonial rule

and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, membership in the EAEU (Kuznetsova & Round 2019; Kluczewska 2024; Kluczewska & Silvan 2024). Moreover, recent analyses of Russian migration to the South Caucasus have highlighted the persistence of a certain "Moscow gaze" (Gunko 2022) and "embodied empire" carried by newcomers (Gavrilova 2022), both of which shape how Russian migrants interpret and engage with their host societies. These dynamics lead migrants to reproduce center–periphery hierarchies, maintain linguistic and cultural distance, and construct parallel expat worlds that draw on long-standing imperial imaginaries of the "Soviet South" as traditional, backward, and peripheral (Gunko 2022; Koplatadze 2019).

Therefore, borrowing from the work on discordant lifestyle mobilities elaborated by Botterill (2017) in relation to middle-class skilled migration in a world shaped by postcolonial hierarchies between the Global Nort and the Global South, the concept of discordant privilege serves as the central theoretical anchor of this paper. This concept captures the tension between Russian migrants' objective privilege in terms of citizenship rights and social status and the precarity they face due to their unequal positionings in the transnational middle class.

Data and Methods

We draw on 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Russian nationals who relocated to Kyrgyzstan after February 2022 and publicly expressed an anti-war stance. The interviews were conducted remotely via MS Teams between March and December 2023 as part of the *Building an Anti-War Common in the Russian Migrant Community* research project at Indiana University Bloomington (USA). Informants were recruited from the OutRush online survey panelist pool and subsequent snowballing. The interviews were carried out by trained Russian speaking researchers including one of the co-authors. Zavadskaya is a co-PI of the project and coordinated recruitment, fieldwork procedures, safety protocols, and data processing. All interview materials underwent rigorous anonymization and cleaning to ensure the secure handling of sensitive data. The project received ethics approval from Indiana University in Bloomington.

Our sample reveals a notable gender imbalance, comprising 13 men and 4 women, a result of the male-dominated migration flows induced by the announcement of the partial military mobilization in September 2022, and features an average age of approximately 37 years. Informants predominantly originate from large and mid-sized urban environments, including major metropolitan areas like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as regional hubs across Siberia, Northwestern, and Southern Russia. Notably, several respondents had already experienced internal migration within Russia, typically moving from smaller cities or rural areas to larger urban centers to access better educational and professional opportunities. Most of the informants possess higher education qualifications and align with typical definitions of skilled migrants. Their professional backgrounds span a range of highly specialized sectors, including information technology, medical and psychological services, scientific research, international logistics, journalism, copywriting, and communications. Notably, several respondents underwent career transitions while still in Russia and have multiple degrees.

We analyzed interview transcripts drawing on reflective thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2018; Byrne 2022). First, we conducted an initial familiarization with the dataset and produced descriptive codes capturing migrants' accounts of departure, settlement in the new country and work situation, plans for the future, and impressions about Kyrgyzstan. Second, we clustered codes into analytic categories by identifying similar meanings across cases ("bureaucratic-linguistic ease," "economic precarity/income instability," "access to resources", "wishes for mobility futures," "Kyrgyzstan as 'good enough' destination"). Third,

we refined these categories into themes through iterative comparison across interviews. Coding was primarily inductive but informed by the article's conceptual lens, especially by the distinction between migrants' economic, social, and cultural capitals, the aspirations–capabilities framework, and by the literature on lifestyle and postcolonial migration. Four interrelated thematics dimensions emerged from respondents' accounts: (1) the macro-level conditions shaping relocation to Kyrgyzstan; (2) the conversion of capitals and their uneven valuation; (3) migrants' capabilities and aspirations to onward mobility; and (4) postcolonial hierarchies.

"Like moving to another Russian city": choosing Kyrgyzstan

Respondents cited various factors influencing their choice of Kyrgyzstan as a migration destination. Many reported constraints to international mobility, primarily due to the lack of external passports and valid visas. On the other hand, due to the membership in the EAEU, the possibility of entering Kyrgyzstan with the internal Russian passport made it an accessible destination for many of those who were not prepared for emigration:

> We found tickets only to Bishkek, and this was a great decision, because we needed a country where we could live with a Russian [internal] passport, because who the hell knows when we would be able to get an external passport. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

Another aspect highlighted by respondents was the simplicity of legal residency procedures in Kyrgyzstan when compared to other destinations. Some respondents relocated to Kyrgyzstan following unsuccessful attempts to secure legal residency in Türkiye and Kazakhstan, or following the expiration of visas or visa-free time periods:

You can't stay in Kazakhstan for a long time if you don't have a job at your place of residence, so I tried to look for some local vacancies, but I didn't find any in the allotted time, so I came [to Kyrgyzstan]. (Informant 15, age not specified, male, researcher and teacher, 27.09.2023)

The less bureaucratic registration processes in Kyrgyzstan thus positioned the country as an accessible alternative when other countries posed legal and administrative barriers. As another informant explained:

I have children from my first husband, and I do not have consent for the children to be taken out and obtain a residence permit [...] In Kyrgyzstan you don't even need to obtain a residence permit, you live here simply by registration. In general, in terms of the complexity of moving to Kyrgyzstan, it's about the same as moving to another city in Russia. (Informant 9, age not specified, female, journalist, 8.10.2023)

Similarly to other cases of postcolonial migration (Åkesson 2016, 2021), linguistic ties emerged as another crucial factor, particularly for migrants with limited foreign language skills or those relocating with children. The use of Russian in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Bishkek, reflects a historical legacy of the Soviet era, when Russian-speaking populations formed a significant demographic and cultural presence (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008). Unlike many other post-Soviet states, independent Kyrgyzstan institutionalized this legacy by granting Russian the status of an official language. A 30-year-old communication specialist explained the significance of language as a decisive factor for his family's move:

> Bishkek speaks Russian [...] It was important when we were deciding where to go. All the children in my [child's] daycare also understand Russian, and all the adults understand Russian, and in general they communicate mainly in Russian (Informant 14, 30 yo, male, musician, 3.9.2023)

Kyrgyzstan emerged less as a destination of choice than as a *feasible* destination in a situation of emergency. The presence of direct flights, the lack of visa requirements, and the use of Russian language significantly lowered the social, bureaucratic, and emotional costs of a sudden departure, particularly for families with children and individuals with limited travel experiences and low foreign language skills. The linguistic continuity enhanced migrants' immediate ability to settle in the new environment, allowing them to navigate local institutions without the time-intensive investments required elsewhere.

A precarious middle class: strategies in the face of insecurity

As mentioned earlier, nearly all respondents fell within the category of highly skilled or skilled migrants and were representatives of Russia's middle class by occupational and educational criteria (Nikula & Chernysh 2022). Yet their positions within this class varied substantially once we considered their economic resources and the uneven convertibility of their cultural and social capitals (Erel 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). Only a few respondents were able to draw on savings and transnational employment, while the majority were with no savings or found themselves in financial distress even before leaving Russia, or lost their jobs immediately after moving. Therefore, many respondents could be described as precarious professionals, gravitating at the margins of the middle class. Several respondents emphasized that their relocation occurred under financial strain, including debt and unemployment:

> I wasn't prepared at all financially, I had debts. They still exist; I'm paying them off as best as I can. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

Informants were aware of their precarious economic situation and recognized the difficulties in applying their professional skills outside of Russia. Despite a degree in economics and years of work experience as a copywriter, one of the informants expressed frustration with his uncertain career future:

> All I had was $200 in savings and my salary. I didn't understand how I was going to live at all. My friends are from IT, [but] I have no technical specialty. I've been working with the Russian language my whole life, and for me, well, everything that's happening is a big blow to what I do, because where can you work with the Russian language if not in Russia? (Informant 17, 28 yo, male, copywriter, 11.6.2023)

By comparing himself to his friends in IT, the informant highlighted the different valuation of skills in migration, restricting his ability to quickly convert his cultural capital into economic capital in a new context (Erel & Ryan 2019). This in turn makes the mobilization of professional and personal networks a critical strategy for Russian migrants. For migrants arriving without savings, transnational networks of Russian-speaking professionals, often extending across former Soviet republics, played a decisive role in facilitating access to employment, housing, and for navigating everyday life in the new country. As one respondent explained, professional ties built prior to migration enabled the rapid conversion of her credentials as a medical doctor into local labor market opportunities:

> We didn't have much money. I needed to go to work. And I had already written to the doctors in Moscow, whom I knew [...] I wrote them a private message, “do you know anyone here in Kyrgyzstan who could offer me a job?”. I have the highest category there, I have a very good one, I have a bunch of certificates, everything to hire me. And they gave me a phone number. Well, a week later, I got a job, and this probably helped me, well, it helped us all. (Informant 13, 48 yo, female, doctor, 19.6.2023)

In this case, the mobilization of professional medical networks enabled the conversion of the doctor’s institutionalized cultural capital into economic capital, as her qualifications were recognized and valorized within the medical labor market in Bishkek. However, reliance on networks also exposes the fragility of migrants’ socio-economic positioning. Respondents who could not count on local connections in the labor market or that could not retain their jobs post-migration, sometimes due to sudden changes in company policies restricting the possibility for remote work, reported a faster decline in socio-economic standing, especially when savings were limited or had been already depleted by repeated moves. One respondent, a marketing specialist turned professional coach, described rapid financial deterioration after losing her job and her partner’s remote work:

> This situation hurts so much because this year we changed everything completely twice, there were God knows how many moves and flights, and we had very little that was stable left, and this job was stability that we could rely on, and now it has been taken away too. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

Over time, some respondents were able to partially stabilize their situation by reorienting their careers. In the case above, the respondent eventually started her own business, providing counselling and coaching services targeted at Russian-speakers and post-Soviet markets:

> I feel like I am in demand in this area now [...]. I see a point of support for myself here despite all this bullshit. My business is growing, and I even took an assistant who helps me with the routine so that I can focus more on scaling up further. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

However, even when migrants experienced income recovery or gains after relocation, earlier financial insecurity and uncertain professional futures continued to restrict their capabilities (De Haas, 2021), as illustrated by the following quote:

> We work so much because life in emigration is hard because...Well, now we both earn much more than we earned in Russia, but we also spend much more: this includes renting an apartment, it includes all these things related to children. And in order to earn enough to afford it, you really need to work a lot, and sometimes, to be honest, we don’t really have any resources to conduct any social activities. (Informant 9, age not specified, female, journalist, 8.10.2023)

Maintaining economic stability after relocation thus depended on intensified labor and rising costs of social reproduction, limiting migrants’ capabilities to invest in building new social networks in the host country or in longer-term strategies of settlement and mobility. Overall, these narratives show that Russian migrants’ positioning as “professional” middle-

class actors, and their relative privilege in Kyrgyzstan coexists with financial insecurity that also shape migrants' subsequent aspirations and future-oriented mobility strategies.

Timelessness and future mobilities

In respondents' accounts, waiting emerged as an important category through which they interpreted their migration to Kyrgyzstan. Most respondents perceived Kyrgyzstan as a temporary transit country rather than a destination for long-term settlement:

> I feel like I'm in a constant state of timelessness, I'm here temporarily. This isn't exactly a voluntary arrival, this isn't the final destination I'd like to be at [...]. I feel like I'm going to leave. (Informant 18, age not specified, female, background in management, 8.9.2023)

Many framed their stay in the country as a necessity dictated by the urgency of the situation and by adverse economic circumstances and bureaucratic barriers in other countries. This feeling of temporariness reflected migrants' difficulty in making long-term plans: aspirations for onward mobility were repeatedly confronted with limited capabilities to realize them (de Haas 2021). Respondents highlighted barriers including restricted access to visas (especially Schengen and US visas), the uneven recognition of professional qualifications, and language requirements that demanded significant time and effort. Despite having an opportunity to join her daughter and granddaughter in the US, this respondent explained why she preferred to remain in Kyrgyzstan:

> _At least here I have a job, while there I'll just go on some kind of guest visa [...] I can't do that [...]. And I also have a very big problem with languages. (Informant 13, 48 yo, female, doctor, 19.6.2023)

For migrants whose professional skills are not readily valued elsewhere, Kyrgyzstan shifted from a transit hub to a more durable option. Conversely, those with more internationally transferable skills and knowledge of English often articulated greater flexibility and clearer aspirations for onward mobility. In this sense, destination choices were selective and classed: the scope of possible futures depended on the extent to which migrants' different capitals could be converted into opportunities for migration beyond Kyrgyzstan. Many aspired to join the cohort of those who managed to relocate to the West, reflecting the aspirations of middle-class professionals. One of the respondents summarized the tension between her aspirations and her concrete possibilities to move to European countries:

> We have nowhere to move to yet. And because of the financial situation, because of the climate, well, in general, I don't see any particular alternatives yet, that is, all the post-Soviet countries, it will be about the same, but it may be more expensive. But we want to go to Europe. (Informant 18, age not specified, female, background in management, 8.9.2023)

The sudden departure from Russia – especially from provincial towns - generated in many a sense of opportunity and even empowerment, as mobility opened life trajectories that previously seemed unimaginable:

> Well, if not Turkey, then Cyprus, okay, it has pros and cons, the "hole of Europe", well, I know, it's expensive there [...] I don't know, what about hospitable Argentina? Where you can just come and live [...] The very thought that I'm a guy from a provincial

> town in Altai, and that I went to live in South America. Well, that's out of this world, that's incredible. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

In this way, everyday life in Kyrgyzstan was frequently narrated through projected futures and possible onward routes. These mobile aspirations stem from the link between what Robertson et al. call "desiring mobility" and "making futures through mobility" (2018, p.615). Many respondents described using their time in Kyrgyzstan to 'invest' in additional skills, learning English or other European languages as strategies to expand future mobility options and secure access to more prestigious destinations:

> The goal is to invest in myself, yeah, like I said, like learning a language and getting a more international profession, and learning about the world, learning about the options that are out there. (Informant 2, 39 yo, male, IT systems analyst, 21.9.2023)

Notably, while many respondents invested in learning European languages and developing skills for international careers, they showed little interest in learning Kyrgyz or engaging with Kyrgyz society and institutions. This echoes observations from other post-Soviet settings hosting Russian migrant communities(Darieva 2025). Respondents' narratives embrace typical aspirations of a mobile, urban, cosmopolitan middle-class, such as professional growth, continued education, and international mobility.

A "humbling moment"? Discordant Privilege and Postcolonial Hierarchies

Kyrgyzstan was rarely framed as a desirable endpoint. Respondents often described it as a "good enough" place: familiar, accessible, and affordable. With approximately 2.3 million people living below the poverty line and with two-thirds of the population surviving on less than 6.85 USD per day (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic n.d.; IMF 2023), Russian migrants found widespread poverty in Kyrgyzstan striking:

> There are many, many social problems here. These include problems with education, low pensions, and generally low living standards. (Informant 12, age not specified, male, logistics specialist, 9.6.2023)

Informants tended to compare Bishkek to Russian provincial towns, noting the excessive smog, the traffic, the chaotic construction, and the deteriorated social infrastructure. These comparisons were also framed through consumer expectations, including the perceived absence of familiar brands and lower-quality services:

> Most of the famous brands are missing. Sometimes I just catch vibes here, as if I were in [a city in Central Russia] in, like, 2005—it's so reminiscent of that. (Informant 7, 30 yo, male, PhD student in computational linguistics, 17.4.2023)

Such observations resonate with other research on Russian migrants' "Moscow gaze" (Gunko 2023) and their "embodied empire" (Gavrilova 2022). Russian migrants' evaluations of post-Soviet countries are mediated by metropolitan standards and post-imperial imaginaries, combining an imperial gaze toward the "peripheries" of Soviet/post-Soviet space with a "global city" gaze characteristic of mobile skilled professionals. Similar to what has been observed in the South Caucasus (Gunko 2023; Darieva 2025), Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan often assessed local institutions, infrastructures, and everyday life through expectations formed in Russian urban centres, reproducing a sense of relative superiority toward the post-Soviet "edges."

At the same time, respondents were explicit in recognizing their relative economic privilege vis-à-vis most of the population, noting visible disparities between their consumption practices and local living standards:

> People are very poor, basically. The majority of the population. I probably spend 10 times more money here than the average citizen earns. And because of that, I live quite privileged even here. (Informant 14, 30 yo, male, musician, 3.9.2023)

However, this awareness of inequality did not necessarily translate into reflexive engagement with its structural causes. Explanations often individualized the causes of poverty, allowing respondents to acknowledge discomfort while simultaneously rationalizing their advantage:

> You have a high living standard and you want to live in a society where there is some kind of justice, yes? Where you don't feel like a king, and there are poor people around you looking at you [...] It's clear that it's not your fault that someone can't earn money or build their life. Still, I feel it — it might be just my personal reaction. (Informant 11, 35 yo, male, game developer, small business owner, 16.4.2023)

The arrival of thousands of Russians to Central Asia has been described as a potential "humbling moment" for Russian citizens (Heusala and Eraliev 2024), destabilizing their previously unquestioned assumptions about their superior status in the Eurasian space. However, the narratives of Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate a persistent attempt to distinguish themselves from the local population and the country hosting them. This postcolonial and hierarchical positioning also becomes visible in respondents' discussions of citizenship.

In the context of tightening mobility restrictions for Russian passport holders, dual citizenship was often mentioned by respondents as a pragmatic strategy to manage uncertainty and expand future mobility options (Ruseishvili 2025). Between 2022 and 2023, applications for Kyrgyz citizenship from Russian nationals increased, accompanied by the emergence of private firms offering expedited services at relatively affordable prices (Najibullah 2023). Many respondents approached the possibility to obtain Kyrgyzstan's citizenship instrumentally, more as a legal resource to bypass visa restriction than a desired political membership:

> In general, I think that for me and those like me, having another citizenship besides Russian is a good option. Kyrgyz citizenship is not an ideal option, but it is better than [having] only the Russian citizenship. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

Russian migrants tended to produce destination hierarchies in which Central Asian countries were positioned at the bottom, associated with lower living standards than Western Europe, the United Stated, the Gulf countries, or South America. The utilitarian framing of citizenship reflects an internalized postcolonial hierarchy in which Central Asian and South Caucasus states are often imagined as peripheral and less prestigious, making the possibility of obtaining their citizenship symbolically devalued relative to the 'strength' of their passports in global rankings. The contrast with Central Asian labor migrants in Russia is instructive: while they often pursue Russian citizenship as a strategy for legal stability and socio-economic security in Russia (Borisova 2020), they remain subject to suspicion and conditional incorporation even after naturalization (Bahovadinova 2024).

These asymmetries expose the hierarchies embedded within regional mobility regimes and the citizenship policies that govern them.

Conclusion

Migration triggered by crisis — be it war, political repression, or economic collapse — rarely unfolds on migrants' own terms. Even for those migrants who may appear as "privileged" mobile subjects, departures under duress often entail navigating legal uncertainty, fragmented support systems, and the risk of downward social mobility. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 produced a sudden reconfiguration of mobility across Eurasia, not only in terms of destinations and routes, but also in terms of who is on the move. Drawing on seventeen interviews with Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan, this article has addressed two gaps in emerging scholarship on post-2022 Russian emigration: the tendency to treat *relokanty* as a relatively homogeneous cohort of political activists and privileged professionals, and the limited attention to relocations to less prestigious destinations such as Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan appeared in respondents' narratives as a feasible and often pragmatic solution in a moment of emergency. As EAEU citizens, Russian migrants moving to Kyrgyzstan could benefit from easy entry requirements and straightforward registration procedures. The widespread use of the Russian language in Bishkek and lower living costs made relocation possible and accessible even for migrants without foreign language skills, travel documents, and limited financial resources. Many respondents arrived with no savings or even pre-existing debt, experienced employment and family disruptions, and were compelled to mobilize their cultural and social capital to reorient their professional trajectories and avoid downward social mobility. The resulting picture is one of internally differentiated middle-class migration: a few migrants could rely on savings or stable remote work , while others struggled with the context-specific devaluation of their skills and the fragile conversion of their fragmented capitals into new employment opportunities.

The article also showed how the perception of place and time played an important role in shaping Russian migrants' aspirations for future mobilities. In respondents' accounts, Kyrgyzstan was widely described as a transit space, a "good enough" country that enabled temporary stability and planning, but rarely matched longer-term imaginaries of desirable mobility. Finally, the article illuminated how postcolonial hierarchies remain embedded in everyday evaluations of place. Respondents' comparisons of Bishkek to Russian provincial cities in the early 2000's resonate with an orientalizing, post-imperial metropolitan gaze towards the "periphery". These postcolonial hierarchies also surfaced in discussions of citizenship, where the possibility of obtaining Kyrgyzstan's passport was regarded instrumentally but symbolically ranked below other, more prestigious alternatives. The contrast with Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, who face systemic racialization, punitive expulsion practices, and conditional inclusion even after naturalization, underscores the stratification of citizenship rights, as well as the asymmetric reproduction of postcolonial power relations within Eurasian mobility regimes.

Bringing these strands together, the article advanced discordant privilege as an analytical lens to capture the coexistence of privilege and precarity in Russian migrants' experiences in Kyrgyzstan. This case suggests the importance of analyzing war-induced mobility not as a uniform phenomenon but as stratified trajectories shaped by class, unequal capabilities and aspirations, and privilege within the context of postcolonial hierarchies of place. Future research would benefit from comparative attention to different Russian migrant profiles (including non-metropolitan, working-class, and minoritized groups), and to how shifting geopolitical conditions reshape interactions between newcomers and local societies, as well as migrants' mobilities over time. Such an agenda can contribute to foregrounding Eurasia

as a space where privilege and precarity are co-produced through historically layered inequalities and rapidly changing mobility regimes.

List of the Informants

Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur

Informant 2, 39 yo, male, IT systems analyst, mathematician

Informant 3, 48 yo, male, psychologist

Informant 4, 35–40 yo, male, developer (IT specialist)

Informant 5, age not specified, female, marketing specialist

Informant 6, 30 yo, male, PhD student in computational linguistics

Informant 7, 25–30 yo, male, journalist

Informant 8, age not specified, female, journalist

Informant 9, age not specified, male, student

Informant 10, 35 yo, male, game developer, small business owner

Informant 11, age not specified, male, logistics specialist

Informant 12, 48 yo, female, doctor

Informant 13, 30 yo, male, musician

Informant 14, age not specified, male, researcher and teacher

Informant 15, 38 yo, male, IT and architecture specialist

Informant 16, 28 yo, male, copywriter

Informant 17, age not specified, female, no fixed profession, background in management

ORCID

Eugenia Pesci 0000-0002-8559-4818
Margarita Zavadskaya 0000-0002-3728-4073

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Generative AI tools have not been used.

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