

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How War Transforms Migration

The Case of Recent Russian Migration in Belgrade

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Abstract

The article examines the implications of new international migration patterns in Belgrade, a topic of utmost importance that significantly affects EU asylum and migration policies. We argue that a paradigmatic shift occurred in migratory processes over the past ten years, which the conventional human movement tracking model fails to capture. The article presents research that seeks to place and represent Russian immigrants in Belgrade in the context of the specific social interactions intensified by military aggression in Ukraine. We will try to compare the demographic composition and social backgrounds of migrants, their implications on contemporary international relations, and the potential impacts of the recent wave of migration. Our reflections on these migratory movements will offer novel perspectives on their consequences for social relations and public policies. This article aims to make new and critical contributions to the ongoing debates about contemporary migration by employing a qualitative argumentative analysis research method.

Keywords: Belgrade; Russians; Migration; Public Policies; Demographics; International Relations

Introduction

Over the last ten years, we have witnessed a paradigmatic shift in migratory patterns, primarily driven by wars. Harbom and Walensteen in their research (2007, p. 624) identified 122 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2006. Merged with figures from Davies et al. (2023, p. 693, and 2025, p. 1224), the total number of wars waged in recent history comes to nearly 150. Previously, wars often led to civilian refugees seeking shelter in neighboring countries. Today, conflicts tend to be more dispersed, resulting in enormous numbers of refugees fleeing violence across multiple borders and continents in search of safety. Understanding these recent migration trends is crucial, as they reflect a new reality shaped by borders in which local conflicts trigger widespread migration worldwide.

In such a way, Russia's 2022 military attack on Ukraine triggered the most significant exodus from the country in three decades, and thousands of Russian citizens have migrated towards neighboring countries and Europe to escape from political oppression and the threat of military mobilization. At different times, the main destination countries were Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Israel. Within Europe, the destinations were Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia (Sergeeva & Kamalov, 2024). Serbia, due to its

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30-day visa-free policy, unlimited number of entries for Russian citizens, and open skies policy for Russian aircraft, instantly became a destination country within this unexpected migratory movement (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 8). Serbia, at the same time, plays a specific role in international relations as a borderland, torn between its aspirations for European Union membership and its intricate relationship with the Russian Federation, which we will further elaborate on in the article. It is also important to note that, as an accession country to the European Union, Serbia did not fully align its foreign policy with that of the union. As we can see from the last analysis of Serbia's alignment with the European Union's foreign policy declarations and measures in the CFSP and Serbia's accession to the European Union report (Novaković et al., 2025, p. 6), Serbia's alignment with EU declarations remained among the lowest compared to other candidate and partner countries, standing at 52 per cent. Although Serbia aligns with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy in its declarations regarding Lebanon, Haiti, Mali, Sudan, and Venezuela, official Belgrade remains silent and unwilling to impose sanctions on Russia.

Belgrade has been a recipient of many waves of migration in the last decade. This trend of continuous migrant influx reflects broader geopolitical events and underscores the complexities of different migration movements and integration challenges. The capital of Serbia has long been a migration hub, with networks previously established across the Western Balkans due to its location at the intersection of Europe's Eastern and Western regions. Belgrade, "which rises spectacularly along the banks of the Danube and the Sava River, has been the site of wars, conquests and rapidly changing fortunes for much of its thousands-years long history" (Hirt, 2009, p. 293) has always functioned as a meeting point for different cultures and now is becoming [or: even today serves as] a central transit route for contemporary migrants seeking better living opportunities. Its hospitable spirit has always facilitated the absorption of new migrants (Spasić & Backović, 2020, p. 584). The geographical closeness to the European Union has been an essential factor in attracting migrants from nations that were once under the Soviet sphere of influence. Over the last decade, refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia have been coming along the Balkan Route (Minca & Collins, 2021, p. 2). Though for some, it is a temporary passage, for others, it is a point of longer-term residence during migration.

Although Serbia and the Russian Federation have maintained mutually respectful diplomatic relations, Belgrade has historically attracted relatively few Russian visitors and usually has had only a small number of Russian residents. According to the 2011 census of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the number of Russian residents was 3247 (Manojlović, 2023). The situation changed dramatically with the initiation of aggressive Russian war activities in February 2022. The Russian population in Belgrade numbered a mere few thousand at its peak before the war, with a majority consisting of government-employed diplomats in administrative positions and management personnel in energy-sector companies. The outbreak of the war also brought a radical shift in regional trade and energy-driven geopolitics.

The conflict heightened the Russian Federation's and the European Union's strategic rivalry, compelling regional actors to re-evaluate their political allegiances and security programs. Serbia's nonalignment policy in imposing sanctions against the Kremlin is characteristic of its position as a geopolitical border state, where European ambitions converge with historical ties to Russia that predate the European accession process. At the same time, the influx of Russian migrants into Serbia raised concerns over population shifts and political realignments, making it a critical transit point during the conflict. The complex interaction among the EU, the Russian Federation, and regional actors reveals how evolving border dynamics related to sovereignty shape relationships under fragile geopolitical conditions in the Western Balkans.

To this new social dynamic and changed geopolitical conditions, we can also add over 1,223,771 migrants and people on the move (Janković et al., 2024, p. 123) who have passed and are still passing, in lesser numbers, through the Republic of Serbia and the City of Belgrade, taking the informal Balkan Route. These are refugees from the Near and Middle East and North Africa. They are staying for short to comparatively longer precarious durations, shedding new light on Belgrade's urban profile. Some migrants escaped wars and difficult economic conditions in their countries, while fewer people arrived on regular working visas from Asian countries affected by financial crises, in what is described as mixed migration flows (see Bobić & Šantić, 2019, p. 220).

As the introduction to the topic indicates, Belgrade hosts a complex combination of different mixed migration movements, with various actors playing distinct roles. The Russian migrations to Belgrade do not follow any preset pattern: many of them occur spontaneously, in different ways. Instead of coming as clandestine migrants seeking asylum, these individuals are entering the country as tourists (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 14-15). They are renewing their status by going in and out of the country, meanwhile, commencing the legal procedure for their longer-term residence. Therefore, the migrants' movements are difficult to predict or statistically follow since they are not officially recognized as refugees; thus, international organizations cannot trace them. Against this backdrop, we focus on the socio-spatial implications of recent migration flows from Russia to Belgrade, specifically regarding border crossing, visa regimes, the economic environment, and socio-cultural exchange dynamics. These include deviations in Belgrade's urban development, driven by the recent influx of new residents, housing fluctuations, administrative obstacles to Russian migration, and cultural diversification due to intensified urban transformation.

This article describes recent migration flows into present-day Serbia, with a focus on its capital, Belgrade. It identifies the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a momentum for expanded migration out of Russia, as well as attention to Serbia's distinctive balancing act, geopolitical positioning, and its free entry for Russian citizens. Seeking further insight into this contemporary migration, the analysis proceeds with an overview of the history of Russian-Serbian relations and the previous waves of Russian migration into Belgrade, which had a profound influence on the city between the world wars. We refer to the strategic geographical positioning of Belgrade as an entry point for migration, marking the beginning of its role as a key point on the Balkans migration route over the last decade. The study proceeds to discuss changes in demography resulting from Serbia's depopulation and the recent influx of Russian migrants, as well as broader reconfigurations across the Western Balkans. For the latter part of the study, Russian migration into Serbia is analyzed, examining its current demography, migration and border controls, public policy responses, and the socio-economic effects of this recent migration flow.

The current wave of Russian migrants arriving in Belgrade is not a unique historical phenomenon. A similar case of migration occurred after the Russian Revolution of 1917, when Belgrade attracted tens of thousands of Russian émigrés who left their mark on the urban landscape, cultural life, and professional institutions. This earlier immigration not only advanced the city's modernization but also reshaped its architectural, social, and cultural dimensions, with effects that remain evident even today. Drawing on a historical parallel, we will investigate whether and in what ways the political and social transformations of cities today, driven by Russian migration in the context of the war, are similar. Demographic characteristics, legal and border regimes, socio-economic impacts, cultural practices, and political attitudes are all factors that determine the current migration wave. Migration occurring under different geopolitical and institutional conditions can still alter the socio-spatial dynamics and make Belgrade a borderland again, where cycles of compulsory and strategic migration predominate.

Finally, the article addresses the unpredictable and informal nature of Russian migration into Belgrade, thereby laying the groundwork for a deeper analysis of its socio-spatial implications and raising the research question: How has the recent influx of Russian migrants been reshaping socio-economic, geopolitical, and cultural dynamics in Belgrade?

Migration-Induced Social Change in Debording Contexts: A Theoretical Framework

The literature on migration emphasizes that large, unexpected migration flows rarely follow a predictable course in host societies (Massey, 1999, p. 306; see also Collier, 2013). Alternatively, these migrations create a complex web of unanticipated changes across various aspects of life in host countries, especially those with liminal or borderland characteristics. We will examine the influx of Russian migrants to Belgrade as a case of armed conflict-induced migration, which, along with a flexible border regime, led to selective integration and uneven societal change. Since single migration and social change theory, as described by Van Hear (2010, p. 1535; see also Castles, 2010; Portes, 2010), cannot account for all the uncertainties addressed in the research question, we also draw on economic social capital (network) theory (Lin, 1999; Haug, 2008; Pieterse, 2003), comparative historical analysis (Albert, 1977), philosophical (Arendt, 1989) argument of *sensus communis* as an interpretative lens, demographic data to track change, border studies and borderscape theory (Anzaldúa, 2012; Brambilla et al., 2015; dell’Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015; Raeymaekers, 2019; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), cultural anthropology (Brettell, 2000; Vertovec, 2011), and (geo)politics (Bialasiewicz, 2009; Browning, 2018; Del Sarto, 2021; Zielonka, 2006; Hyndman, 2012).

Serbia is essential to this study because it points out the country’s position as a geopolitical and regulatory borderland between the European Union and the Russian Federation. The borderland framework identifies topics characterized by legal frameworks that directly influence migration flows and migrants’ managing strategies (Giddens, 1984). Serbia’s visa-free entry policy for Russian citizens, its ambiguous alignment with EU foreign policy, and a relaxed investment framework have enabled debording. While borders remain fixed and hard territorial boundaries (Brunet-Jailly, 2011, p. 3), convenient access to residence, self-employment, and entrepreneurship is increasingly negotiable. Such an environment promotes migratory behavior that falls outside the typical definitions of either a refugee or an economic migrant. The migration of Russians to Belgrade illustrates the relationship between a country’s geopolitical positioning and individual migrant agency, resulting in highly mobile, inadequately legally established, and socially significant migration flows.

Research on urban migration shows that migrants with substantial economic and cultural capital tend to move to larger cities where they can establish social, professional, and cultural networks (Lerch et al., 2025, p. 17). This indicates that Russians in Belgrade have influenced increased housing demand and (sub)cultural expansion in the city center, which led to the creation of “social bubbles”, which are separate social environments maintained through digital interaction, professional connections, and shared language, rather than isolated communities.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives situate Russian migration to Belgrade as a category of armed conflict-induced migration in a borderland state, resulting in occasional integration and varying societal impacts. The proposed theoretical framework will be used as a compass for the empirical analysis by examining prior Russian migration and comparing it with contemporary demographic traits, urban and housing effects, labor market participation, cultural integration, and political attitudes among Russian immigrants in Belgrade.

Serbian–Russian Relations in both Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Coinciding with the end of the First World War and the distraction caused by the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, a new demographic and social upheaval occurred in the capital of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The beginning of the 1920s marked the emergence of an urban renaissance in Belgrade. Despite their war victory, Serbian society was devastated, and more than a third (31.3%) of its population died in the war period (Radivojević & Penev, 2014, p. 41).

The escape of the Russian Tsarist elite from the revolution spilled over into the financial sector, and many of those affected afterward contributed to the formation of banks and to Belgrade's economic growth. The arrival of Serbs from Austro-Hungarian territories and educated Tsarist Russians created a tangible mix of influences in the town, still evident today in the urban landscape and architecture (Prošen, 2016, p. 624), medicine, science, and the arts. Some of the most remarkable edifices in the very heart of Belgrade were conceived precisely in this period, drastically changing the city's urban landscape, which, until then, had the shape of a decadent Ottoman settlement. As Hint suggests (2009), "post-Ottoman Europeanization had powerful implications" (p. 294) for Serbia's capital.

The historical record of migration from Russia forms a substantial chapter of the history of Russia and Serbia. It illustrates the two nations' political, social, and cultural interactions over the past two centuries. Besides the period under review, migration from Russia to Serbia has existed at other times. For example, Russia aided in liberating Serbia from Ottoman rule in the 19th century. Russia's efforts in the First Serbian Uprising, 1804–1813, and the Second, 1815, were very beneficial in the relationship between Russia and Serbia. Russian officers and diplomats came to Serbia following the uprisings to modernize society and helped organize the newly independent state (Vujačić, 1996, p. 776). As discussed above, the most remarkable migration of Russians to Serbia occurred after 1917, when 60,000 Russians migrated to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, of whom around 40,000 permanently settled and integrated into Serbian society (Radojčić et al., 2022, p. 55).

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, particularly Belgrade, became the center of the anti-Bolshevik Russian diaspora. These refugees left a strong influence on the intellectual and cultural life of interwar Serbia. Many anti-Bolshevik Russians emigrated to Serbia and maintained Russian religious and cultural traditions. Many Tsarist military officers joined the army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Radojčić et al., 2022, p. 57). Russian migrant priests played a crucial role in establishing Russian Orthodox parishes and other institutions, followed by many famous Russian artists, writers, and composers who emigrated to Serbia (Vesić, 2015, p.103). The interwar period saw a persistent arrival of Russian refugees, most of whom settled in Belgrade (Djordjević, 2025, p. 102). Russian migrants established various organizations, from language educational institutes to cultural foundations, playing a key role in maintaining Russian bourgeois culture in Serbia.

For example, the Russian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, in the vicinity of Tašmajdan Park (see Figure 1), and the Russian cemetery and ossuary at Novo Groblje (Cohen, 2014, p. 646), which contains many notable Russian intellectuals who escaped the Bolshevik Revolution, symbolize the presence of the interwar Russian community in Serbia. Most of the governmental buildings in the center of Belgrade were built by Russian architects (Ignjatović, 2011, p. 69). Here, we can also emphasize that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the last European country to recognize the Soviet Union until June 1940 (Aghayev, 2017, p. 5).

After the Second World War, "the critical phase in Yugoslav-Soviet relations was in 1948 when, following the Informbureau resolution, Yugoslavia was virtually ousted from the Eastern Alliance" (Proroković, 2020, p. 197). This event was a radical shift and a U-turn in Socialist Yugoslavia's international relations, leaning the country westwards. Even though

"Khrushchev had apologized for the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Soviet-led bloc" (Rothermund, 2014, p. 24), the two countries never established deeper diplomatic ties, and Yugoslavia was never part of any Soviet-led international organization. In line with this, the formation of Socialist Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito made the future of most Russian immigrants questionable and unbearable, because of their roots and origin. They have been seen as adversaries of Yugoslavia's socialist revolution, and they had to emigrate further after the Second World War. The significance of the Russian diaspora in Serbia dropped, and its members moved to France, America, Australia, and other Western countries. Despite this, a small Russian community stayed in Belgrade.

In the context of attempts to reconstruct national identity amid internal conflict, economic issues, and altered regional borders, Serbian-Russian relations came to play an increasingly crucial role from the 1990s onward. Of particular note in this regard was the evolution of bilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation and the signing of the declaration on strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia in 2013 by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Tomislav Nikolić (Aghayev, 2017, p. 7). In this way, Russia became one of Serbia's most important partners in the energy sector. Based on a shared historical context, cultural affinities, and religious bonds, the post-disintegration phase witnessed a remarkable intensification of relations between Russia and Serbia.

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Serbia faced numerous political challenges and border disputes. In addition, Serbia encountered serious economic challenges. The breakdown of Yugoslavia's economy, along with the devastating impacts of the conflict, left Serbia with a weakened infrastructure, high unemployment, and severe hyperinflation (see Lyon, 1996, p. 293). In the context of the above economic problems, Serbia had to implement reforms to transform its centrally planned socialist-type economy into a free-market one. As Jovanović (2023) points out: "Because of the complexity of the process, the reconstruction and modernization of the Serbian economy required aid from outside sources, investments, and the formation of new economic alliances" (p. 232).

The Russian Federation has been a partner in this quest, investing in strategic sectors such as energy and providing Serbia with access to sell consumer goods to its large market (YTarcic, 2020, p. 5). During the post-Yugoslav period, as both nations grappled with problems and prospects, economic collaboration with Russia was imposed on the relationship. A thorough understanding of the political aspects of this relationship requires an exploration of the similarities that have brought the two states together. Then again, as Jovanović (2023) asserts: "The profound impact of Orthodox Christianity, cultural links to Slavic peoples, and common historical experiences have all led to the formation of a robust and long-lasting alliance between Serbia and Russia" (p. 233).

Russians maintained links with Serbia and continue to impact Serbia's intellectual and cultural landscape. Its emigration has therefore made a permanent imprint on Serbia's cultural heritage, contributing significantly to architecture, religion, education, and the arts. Although geographically remote and without a shared border, the historical, religious, and cultural ties between Russia and Serbia remain strong (Aghayev, 2017, p. 8).

To briefly explain the complex political and social Serbo-Russian relationship, we will retract the analogy and employ an argument that incorporates Arendt's interpretation that Kant's political philosophy relies on Kant's concept of *Sensus Communis* found in his "Critique of Judgement" (Kant, 1790/1987, p.159). Arendt's recovery of Kant's original concept wherein she emphasizes that this type of aesthetic judgment could also be perceived as a way of political thinking (judgment) should expound on the entangled relationship between Russia and Serbia relationship, which is always followed by an additional layer of details that cannot be presented in a plain, one-dimensional sense and justified with direct political interest.

Throughout history, political relations between the two countries have varied dramatically, and many authors have tried to explain this as soft power influence (Kosović, 2016) or emotionally and historically fueled influence (Meister, 2018, p. 52), revolving around conflicts over ideology and expansionist activities. We argue that this relationship is neither a game of power nor an emotional one, but an example of *Sensus Communis* judgment. The idea is that Serbian political viewpoints on Russia are driven by second-order political judgments based on a sense of shared community. The dynamic currently in place, with an ongoing transition, brings into perspective the complex relationship between political leaders and ordinary citizens, regardless of government-stated policy. Records indicate that the periods of diplomatic disconnection between Serbia and Russia, or Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, have been longer than those of friendly, stable ties. Concisely, relations between Serbia and Russia are an entangled intersection of *common sense* and *community sense (sociability)* as identified by Kant (Arendt, 1989, p. 8).

Serbia's depopulation adds another dimension to the already complex migration events in the Western Balkans related to the breakup of Yugoslavia, a pivotal moment that significantly contributed to the widespread demographic decline currently being experienced (Koyama, 2022, p. 6). On the other hand, border practices that led to recent Russian migration bring a paradox for a depopulating society. While Serbia struggles with significant brain drain (Radonjić and Bobić, 2021) of educated young citizens leaving for the EU, Russians with a similar social profile are simultaneously filling the gap.

Continued economic insecurity adds to an already critical demographic situation: Serbia's birth rate is very low, at around 1.6 children per woman, even lower than the 2.1 needed to replace the next generation. So, recent migration has been driven mainly by the country's "general economic, social, and political situation" (Lutz and Gailey, 2020, p. 16-22). An estimate indicates that more than a million qualified, ready-to-work people from Serbia have migrated over the last ten years. The correlation with reduced birth rates is supported by forecasts that over a third of Serbia's population will retire by 2050. The demographic imbalance leaves a smaller reservoir of working-age people to fill available positions in the labor market, which recent, predominantly young Russian migration may help fill.

However, the current flow of Russian migrants to Belgrade demonstrates the massive discrepancy between official government policies and what is happening on the ground. Officially, they are either tourists or temporary entrepreneurs in Belgrade. The Serbian authorities seem not to pay attention to them, with discussion on this topic confined mainly to a small selection of independent media outlets. Similarly, they are invisible in Russian official discourse, and the Kremlin is looking the other way, as recognition of this movement of young, educated people would contradict Putin's propaganda efforts (Rujević, 2025).

From this perspective, the Russian migrants in Belgrade are experiencing a strange "geopolitical limbo" that has been ignored by all the state actors of the current international relations settings. The European Union has a determinedly anti-Russian stance, and the Belgrade government is exceptionally balanced in trying not to provoke the Kremlin. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is looking the other way and does not seem very engaged in its population's mass exodus. On the other hand, Russian migrants in Belgrade are relatively well integrated, with minimal public objection or social tension. Russian migrants' businesses are developing networks, enabling them to experience a sense of normality. The Serbian residents perceive this migration not solely as a political issue, but also as a foreign addition to a broader community bonded by a common Slavic and Christian Orthodox heritage.

Figure 1. Russian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, near Tašmajdan Park.



Source: Photo credits to N. Miličić, Belgrade 2025.

Belgrade: Emerging Borderland between the EU and Russia

Different factors are at work in the growing Russian presence in Serbia, reflecting broader regional geopolitical reconfigurations. The European Union and international sanctions on the Russian Federation, raised in 2014 “after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula” (Bělin et al., 2023, p. 246), affected virtually every aspect of life, from business and finance to access to specific technologies. As such, many Russian entrepreneurs looked to Belgrade as a place where they could evade sanctions, run their businesses, and invest. As Patalakh (2018) notes, “Serbia is currently the sole state outside the post-Soviet area which enjoys a free trade zone with Russia” (p. 496). The result creates a genuine alternative for individuals whose business interests relate to the European Union market.

Serbia’s relatively affordable cost of living, coupled with developing technology and business industries, has made the nation appealing to Russian entrepreneurs and tech experts. Many Russians, particularly those in information technology, have migrated to Serbia to take advantage of growing business opportunities, a favorable tax environment, and relatively low-cost housing (Schulte et al., 2024, p. 134). A notable increase in Russian investment in Belgrade’s rental property market has been witnessed (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 10). Russian students and scholars are also relocating to Belgrade, drawn by educational programs, cultural exchange, and opportunities for research collaboration in history, literature, and the social sciences.

Most Russian migrants settle in Belgrade, though some online workers have settled in smaller towns and cities outside Serbia’s capital. These are retirement-friendly places, and

apart from rural lifestyles, they may also offer easy access to services (Tomović, 2022). Russian-language cultural groups and internet-based social networks have been formed alongside the growth of Serbia's Russian community. Russian-language television channels and websites are gaining audiences in Serbia, reflecting the growing presence of Russian expatriates (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 11). This fact is significant to note within the context of geopolitical competition, as Serbia's political non-alignment has sometimes complicated its relations with Russia just as much as with Western countries. The growth of Russian nationals in Serbia may complicate the country's international relations, particularly its accession to the European Union. Serbia is still not joining "EU sanctions on Russia despite Brussels's continuous requests" (Patalakh, 2018, p. 511; Novaković et al., 2025), maintaining a delicate balance.

The Russian migration has raised fears of higher property rates and house rents, which would negatively affect the local population in Belgrade (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 23). Additionally, there are ongoing debates regarding the extent to which these migrants contribute significantly to the Serbian economy or take advantage of reduced taxation and a lower cost of living. Political uncertainty in both countries, economic pressure, and cultural closeness direct the latest Russian migration flow to Serbia. It was clear from the beginning that this migration has economically benefited specific groups, mainly real estate owners, but has also led to possible further stratification of Belgrade's local population (Vlaović, 2024). However, it is accompanied by problems of long-term integration and broader geopolitical implications for Serbia, considering its location between Russia and the West. It is expected that the migration trend will also continue in the future, and this opinion is supported by data from recent research by Cvijić and Nikolić (2025, p. 14), which shows significant growth in residence registrations.

Debordering Serbia: Remaking Legal Borders for Russian Citizens

While Serbia has been seeking membership in the European Union since 2012, its foreign policy remains only partially aligned with the European Union's standards. Serbia has deliberately tried to create a favorable legal environment for foreign investments to accelerate its accession to the European Union. Serbia's adoption of its *Law on Investment* ("Sl. glasnik RS", br. 89/2015 and 95/2018), followed by a set of legal and economic incentives, "resulted in the liberalization of foreign investment into Serbia" (Vukmirović et al., 2021, p. 123). Such "legal harmonization rules" include streamlining bureaucratic procedures and offering incentives, such as tax cuts and grants, to make the business climate more attractive to EU companies. But in the end, these policies attracted more Chinese and Russian companies than European ones (Jovičić & Marjanović, 2024, p. 111).

Serbia's geographical position is essential to its economic strategy. Located at the intersection of the main corridors of Central and Southeast Europe, Serbia is near European Union markets but is not a member of the European Union. Its legal business setup framework is like that of the European Union. Still, it is more flexible, making it an ideal location for Chinese and Russian companies to invest in a more responsive region than the European Union's stringent regulatory system (Jovičić & Marjanović, 2024, p.113). Consequently, many multinational companies have opened offices in Serbia, motivated by reduced operational costs and a favorable business environment (Vukmirović et al., 2021, p. 129). These preconditions have certainly favored the arrival of this contemporary wave of Russian migration.

Not least, Serbia's unique diplomacy has had a distinct influence on migration patterns. The state has adopted flexible visa rules that reflect its commitment to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which served as the cornerstone of the diplomacy of the old socialist Yugoslavia. In his work on this topic, Čavoški (2014) points out that the formation

of the Non-Aligned Movement “was closely interconnected with the evolution of Yugoslavia’s relations with different Third World countries during the first two decades of the Cold War” (p.184). This aided cooperation with countries from the Third World, and the loose border, along with a liberal visa regime from that period, did not undergo significant changes until Serbia began its accession negotiations with the European Union. This phenomenon has created a diverse workforce, further contributing to the diversity of Serbia’s labor market and the economy of Belgrade.

Many migrants who come to Serbia are motivated by the proximity to the European Union and the potential to obtain long-term work permits and other documentation, thereby gaining easier access to the visa-free Schengen Area. Migrants expect to eventually reach their destinations in the European Union and look at these countries as prospects for better life opportunities. Migrants from other third-world countries, such as Turkey, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal, commonly fill labor niches in lower-paid sectors, including construction, logistics, cleaning services, and hospitality, thereby shaping Belgrade’s new urban and economic profile. In seeking these opportunities, the majority of migrant workers in Serbia accept precarious working conditions, including low salaries, prolonged working hours, and shorter-term contracts.

Serbia has become a significant refuge for Russians, adding to the growing list of nations such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey. Data from Khan (2023) indicate that nearly 30,000 Russians were granted temporary and long-term residence permits in Serbia. The following year brought new figures and trends, according to the official data provided by the Serbian Border Police Administration at the request of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), “in the period from February 24, 2022, until December 31, 2024, there were 73,197 applications for permanent residence permits in Serbia filed by Russian immigrants” (Cvijić and Nikolić, 2025, p.13). Upon arrival, most Russian migrants transitioned to their new status by establishing businesses in Serbia, mainly in sectors directly or indirectly linked to the European Union market. Entrepreneurial activity is especially appealing because it enables them to continue their operations despite the complexity introduced by sanctions against Russia. Many other Russian citizens have not yet received their permits. Unofficial estimates of the number of Russians residing in the country are approximately 300,000, but they are prone to revision due to the extreme mobility of Russian migration (Georgijevski, 2025).

According to the Serbian Border Police Administration, the total number of registrations of Russian citizens from February 24, 2022, to December 31, 2024, amounts to 948,934, with a peak in 2024 (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 14). The number of entries should not be interpreted as the number of individuals, since many individuals are re-entering the country; the figure clearly shows the extent of the ongoing movements. This migration changed Belgrade’s demographic profile and introduced new social dynamics, which we will present later. Belgrade has emerged as the primary host for many of these Russian migrants, and according to Cvijić and Nikolić, research indicates that 83.4% of Russian citizens in Serbia currently reside in its capital (2025, p. 18). This influx constitutes a considerable increase in the population of a relatively small nation, and the trend of incoming individuals shows no signs of slowing.

The weak border, ‘Visa Run system’, has been implemented to simplify the process of working around Serbia’s legal system for Russian migrants who demand one exit from the country monthly after their temporary tourist residency has run out to prolong their residency status until they qualify for long-term residency. This law primarily affects young Russian migrants facing economic hardship who cannot prove residency status through business registration, employment, property ownership, or children’s attendance at local schools, which could otherwise serve as a legal basis for residency. Numerous migrants

travel via the Sremska Rača border crossing between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with visa-free entry (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 3). Local entrepreneurs in Belgrade have seen an opportunity and established a profitable enterprise offering taxi transport services for Russians. These services usually involve arranged round-trips to the border and back, including lunch at a nearby restaurant, making the trip easy for those balancing the tangle of their new life in Serbia. A large number of Russian migrants still use this method to extend their legal status in Serbia, as it requires little time or effort (Cvijić and Nikolić, 2025, p. 14).

Analytical elements of recent Russian migration to Belgrade

This section examines the key analytical dimensions of recent Russian migration to Belgrade, focusing on composition and broader social and urban implications.

Demographic profile

As previously stated, since 2022, a significant number of Russian citizens have elected to reside in Belgrade. The large number of migrants is between 25 and 34 years of age. The Russian migration mainly comprises trained and qualified human resources, namely skilled IT sector personnel (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 1). When it comes to gender representation, Cvijić and Nikolić's survey (2025, pp. 16-17) shows that 48.5% are men, and 50.5% are women. The majority of respondents are amid the ages of 25 and 39 (55.6%), 11.7% are youth between 18 and 24, individuals between 40 and 54 years are 30.4%, while the least represented age group is 55 and older (2.2%) and most participants have a higher education (66.4%), are self-employed (42.4%) and are married (42.9%).

Urban impact

Following the rise of the real estate market and from the data released by the Republican Geodetic Institute, we can notice that Russian migrants financed about €180 million into Belgrade's housing sector in 2023 and an additional €85 million in 2024, which roughly accounts for six per cent of the total real estate market in Serbia (Lazarević, 2024). Russians arriving in Belgrade affected the social context, indicating a rise in housing demand. In the beginning, most of the money was spent on renting apartments, but later, funds were used to purchase properties. Renting properties in Belgrade has increased considerably, with some areas having seen significant price increases (Vlaović, 2024). This phenomenon hit the least well-off part of Serbian society, especially young workers and students who had paid, up to now, a reasonable price for their apartments.

The expanded demand has pushed some landlords to evict tenants who cannot keep up with rising costs, putting more pressure on Serbia's housing sector. Russian migrants are predominantly positioned in central Belgrade's urban areas, putting direct pressure on available housing (Vlaović, 2024). The social context in some neighborhoods of Belgrade has changed, leading to increased animosity between residents and new migrants (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p.23). Russian migrants are increasingly turning towards modern apartments with space-efficient layouts and advanced technologies that facilitate remote work. In addition, high demands are placed on tiny, single-family apartments that balance loneliness and social engagement nicely. Real estate companies are challenged to find such housing solutions, which are rare in Belgrade's market, so they sometimes cooperate with similar companies with Russian origin management (Vlaović, 2024).

Studying those related factors is essential for understanding not only changes in housing demands but also other economic and social trends, too. Serbia's legal framework for housing and migration is comparatively liberal, and some simple requirements must be followed. All the necessary documents can be provided through ordinary contracts stamped by the nearest public notary's office. Exploring this question from social services and infrastructure development perspectives brings essential insights. The Russian migrants

pose new challenges to Belgrade's infrastructure and social services. For example, increased demand for means of transport can overburden already poorly established public transport.

Intensified healthcare demands led to new private healthcare facilities intended exclusively for Russians. The situation also encompasses dealing with linguistic barriers and a shortage of state government insurance on the part of Russian migrants, which makes it difficult for them to have quality state-supported healthcare. Conversely, private clinics quickly embraced the situation and started outsourcing Russian-speaking doctors and nurses (Georgijevski, 2022). Giant billboards advertising these services could be seen all over Belgrade.

Similarly, law offices have begun providing administrative assistance, and serving Russian immigrants have been busy drafting documents needed to start new companies to aid clients in quickly obtaining residence permits (Stefanović, 2022). While relatively expensive, this inclusion process is efficient and has created migratory patterns that lead to demographic changes in urban areas, thus profoundly changing socio-economic formations. Additionally, Russian immigrants have created virtual enclaves, cloud communities, and online communities in various spheres, providing key support systems to aid in sharing resources and communication while building bridges to individuals who share identical backgrounds in this novel context in Belgrade. However, the attempt to nurture this "social bubble" can unintentionally perpetuate segregation in urban areas by segregating communities of Russian immigrants in Belgrade from mainstream society.

Socioeconomic trends

According to the most recent statistics from the Serbian Business Registration Agency, 1,764 companies and 9,317 Russian entrepreneurs were established after February 2022 and are operating in Serbia. If we add to these figures the 296 companies and 721 entrepreneurs owned by Russian citizens who arrived before 2022, we reach a total of 12,080 (Gavrić, 2024). These data point to a shift in the business climate: while numerous Russian expats were focused on Information Technology and Information Technology-related activities in the early days, increasing numbers are now establishing companies in consultancy, handicrafts, retail, and tourism. Consequently, local Serbian residents have, to some extent, begun benefiting from the improved services offered by these recently opened Russian companies. Since these businesses are registered in Serbia, they are considered local actors, contributing to the domestic economy, which economists describe as making Serbia's economic climate more robust regarding competition. Apart from that, foreign direct investment can contribute to the dynamics of economic activity in the country, and the contribution made by the Russian expatriates has been an essential factor in boosting the GDP.

To explain the economic and employment trends of the current Russian migration in Belgrade, we will, to a great extent, draw on Zejnulahović et al.'s (2024, p.6) research on profiling Russian immigration to Serbia. Their interviewees show, on average, that Russians coming to Serbia are generally highly educated. Thus, 85.6% of their respondents indicated that they had obtained degrees at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. In comparing results with the answers regarding their professional field, most respondents (54.6%) stated that they are Information Technology professionals, which aligns with media reports about an exodus of educated IT experts from Russia.

Many of the respondents are of working age, and more than two out of three (68.5%) were employed full-time when they left Russia. Less than a tenth (8.3%) reported their own business in Russia, whereas a substantial number (13.4%) worked freelance. Approximately 5% were unemployed before leaving Russia, ranging from a little over 10% (10.6%) in Serbia. The doubling of unemployment is a concerning trend in line with difficulties in becoming

employed and achieving a satisfactory financial status. In addition, 15.3% of the participants stated that the Russian company still employs them.

Over one-quarter of the interview participants (26.4%) indicated that they are employed by a company based in Serbia, typically founded by Russian migrants themselves. Among the tendencies that Russian migrants have in common is establishing and registering a company in Serbia. Apart from financial freedom, this assists them in managing their employment status, whether self-employed or employed in their businesses, making it relatively simple to obtain a long-term, temporary, or permanent residence permit. Finally, 23.1% of the recent Russian migrants indicated they work, usually remotely, for neither Russian nor Serbian companies (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p.6).

As far as social inclusion is concerned, Russian migrants behave according to their demographic image. Young people generally interact with their peers through alternative musical and other artistic events organized in Belgrade. Meanwhile, migrants who came to Serbia with their families often contact the local population through their children, who attend Serbian schools. It is also notable that Russian migrants whose children are enrolled in Serbian schools are keener to learn the Serbian language. As Zejnulahović's survey also points out, young and single Russian migrants view Serbia as a temporary settling solution, primarily because their goal is usually to move forward to the EU, which they perceive as the final destination. In contrast, migrant families with children consider Belgrade a better solution to be their permanent place of residence (2024, p. 7). The rule that if the child is enrolled in a regular Serbian school, the parents automatically receive a residence permit, regardless of other conditions that should be met to acquire this right, plays a significant role in this phenomenon. The Republic of Serbia has managed in the last decade to pass many favorable regulations and harmonize its legal framework and diploma recognition with the countries of the European Union. Even during the migrant crisis of 2015, when Serbia faced a massive influx of refugees from war-torn areas in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the educational system adapted programs for refugee children, conducted many training sessions for teachers, and provided various professional courses for those teachers who work with vulnerable social groups in foreign languages. In addition, the Republic of Serbia redirected and organized many teachers of the Serbian language from its system on projects to establish the teaching of the Serbian language to children whose native language is not Serbian. This should lead to an easier inclusion of Russian children in the Serbian educational system (Tuvić, 2023).

Cultural integration

Cultural integration from the bottom up is a cornerstone in the discourse about new immigration. The socio-cultural effects of migration have recently become more noticeable in Belgrade and in contrast to the previously dominating mutual official governmental cultural exchange based on the general knowledge content personified in hosting Russian state choirs, ballet, and military ensembles that perform a traditional program adapted to the broadest audience, recent Russian migration brought alternative artistic content characteristic of Sankt Petersburg and Moscow underground scenes, enhancing in this way Belgrade's cultural diversity (Čoko, 2023). The capital of Serbia now hosts many Russian alternative music bands that organize concerts (see Figure 2) with the support of Serbian agencies and counterpart bands (Kovačević, 2024). A similar situation occurred after the Revolution (Vesić, 2015). Like back then, Russian migrants also brought various forms of artistic expression in visual fine art, organizing exhibitions, celebrations, and rituals that contribute to Belgrade's urban fabric, which has been impoverished in the last few years due to the departure of many young people from Serbia compared to a few years ago. This alternative cultural exchange provides a novel feature of a cosmopolitan environment

where new artistic forms are created, making Belgrade's art scene more attractive and dynamic. Integrating Russian migrants into Belgrade's social fabric is challenging due to the financial insecurity of both populations, and we can perceive this social inclusion as gradual.

Figure 2. Russian cultural advertising in a street of Belgrade.



Source: Photo credits to N. Miličić, Belgrade 2025

Political affairs

Despite the general disagreement with the Kremlin and the war, however, most respondents (72.8%) in Cvijić and Nikolić's survey express limited interest or are very careful in engaging more actively in political affairs (2025, p. 4). One of the explanations, among others, is the fear that many migrant families will put their safety and legal status in the country at risk. There are cases in which the Serbian authorities refused to issue residence permits to Russian migrants and their families who were politically active and who, after anti-war protests at the beginning of their stay, simply withdrew and began to prioritize their well-being (Novakov, 2024). However, their political views and opinions are relatively easy to analyze using indirect data from surveys on the topic. The clearest example of this is the March 2024 analysis of the election results, when the Russian diaspora made it very clear that they disagreed with the Kremlin's official policy (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 9). A noteworthy proportion of the votes featured the name Alexei Navalny, who had died in a Russian jail only one month earlier as a victim of the inhumane conditions he faced as a political dissident, representing the increasing fight against authoritarianism in Russia.

In contrast, Zejnulahović et al. (2024, p. 10) found that the majority of single and younger respondents reported participating in various civic activism events and actions organized by the Russian-speaking diaspora in Serbia. The most common activities were anti-war protests, volunteering, participating in the Russian presidential election in Belgrade, signing petitions, and donating funds to opposition media in Russia. An overwhelming number of these Russian migrants (70.8%) strongly believe that the Russian government is to blame for the Ukraine crisis. The interviewees were also asked to evaluate the actions of President Vladimir Putin, the Russian military, and the Russian media. The opinions were all highly negative, with the sole positive assessment of the military; 69% disagreed. Putin received a massive 77.7% negative response rate, with the media receiving the most critical evaluation at 79.2% of individuals disapproving of its performance (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p.11).

Alternatively, the ratings of Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, and Western media were mixed but predominantly negative. Western media perceptions were mirrored in a 39.3% negative response, the EU received a 45.3% negative response, and NATO received a 50.5% negative response (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 11). As noted earlier, the duration and violence of the war and its never-ending course impact respondents' attitudes: most respondents were frustrated with the protracted war, seeing it as a meaningless sacrifice. They also felt powerless when considering the future direction of things.

Concluding Remarks

The study showed that the recent, war-induced migration of Russians to Belgrade signals a phenomenon that transcends a temporary demographic trend. As with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the contemporary Russian movement demonstrates a process that unfolds in a borderland context, circulating through flexible patterns of sovereignty and selective integration among migrants and within local social life. Such historical focus makes it clear that the current migration pattern within Russia can be viewed in the broader context of politically driven displacement rather than merely a response to the conflict currently being waged. Belgrade has lately seen a significant influx of Russian immigrants, mainly younger, professional IT workers. Our argumentation is that the Serbian economy has, to some extent, benefited from this, with 12,080 businesses registered since these immigrants arrived. They have also contributed through entrepreneurship and self-employment.

On the other hand, the spillover effects of the conflict in Ukraine have forced Serbia to diversify its energy sources and thus minimize its dependence on Russia. This development not only indicates a shift in its geopolitical position but also underscores the political context in which migration is taking place. Nevertheless, this change could also limit future exposure to Russian influence. The immigrants have influenced complex socio-spatial and socio-economic challenges, including issues related to social integration, public service provision, and housing access. Bringing change to the city with their cultural habits and customs, Russian migrants are enriching Belgrade's social and artistic life, even as they face a growing gap between themselves and the broader Serbian community. The blend of presence and distance encapsulates the typical tension felt by well-educated migrant groups in standing out versus staying apart. This ambivalence is reflective of the tension between visibility and social distance, which often distinguishes highly skilled migrant communities. The issue of integration remains an important theme, with some migrants building support systems within their own communities rather than fully integrating into the local community. When the political affairs are analyzed, our findings also confirm the viewpoint that these immigrants tend to hold more liberal, pro-democratic views and are predominantly opposed to the Kremlin's regime and its armed intervention in Ukraine. These findings disprove fears over the possibility of this immigrant community posing a security threat to the region or being a representative of the Kremlin's influence. Instead,

they represent an entrepreneurial community able to conceive and produce an improved Serbia, overcoming its stagnant economic and social fate.

These observations confirm the general theories of migration and do not view it merely from a demographic perspective but as a transformative process. Traditional theories on migration have long emphasized that migration is not merely the movement of persons but a process that changes the host society through changes in the labor market, housing, arts, culture, and politics. The unexpected arrival of relatively similar groups of migrants, especially those with higher education, typically produces uneven effects, benefiting some economic sectors while straining housing markets and urban infrastructure, and creating an unstable social environment. Here, the migration of Russians to Belgrade is the independent variable, and changes in urban space, housing, labor structures, cultural practices, and political attitudes are the dependent variables.

Understanding these dynamics must also include the receiving society's perception of migration. To gain a deeper understanding of Russian migrants' perceptions in Serbia and Serbia's ambiguous political position towards Russia, it is necessary to consider both strategic and political assessments. From Arendt's interpretation of *sensus communis*, we conclude that Serbian attitudes toward Russian migrants are primarily influenced by a shared sense of historical community. This means there are limited societal tensions in Belgrade over Russian migration, despite economic problems. The Serbian attitude towards Russian immigrants does not depend on their foreign policy positions, but on their sense of communal identity.

These thoughts help to explain the long-term implications of the current wave of migration. Based on this brief, non-exhaustive analysis, we propose that the development of the current Russian diaspora is directly related to developments in Russia. The duration of the armed conflict, the rigidity of the internal regime, the performance of the war-influenced national economy and the attitude of the international community towards Russia all have a decisive influence on the transformation of this group of temporary expatriates into a stable, integrated community that, with its own specific characteristics, could become an important part of Belgrade's social landscape and generate enduring form of societal transformation.

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Funding

DIMEast - *Diversity and the Impact of Migration on the Eastern Borders of the European Union. Territorial Cohesion, Solidarity, and Security as Global Challenges in the Western Balkans, the Eastern European Partnership, and the Russian Federation*, as part of the Research Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN) No. 2022LJTTBP – CUP: J53D23005600001, at the Department of Humanities, University of Trieste.

Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI tools have been used to enhance the quality and readability of the article for language proofreading (Grammarly) and to assist with formatting the list of references (ChatGPT).

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