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ARTICLE

Soon I'll be saying goodbye to İstanbul: Russian relocants' uncertain lives in motion

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Russian relocants in Turkey, focusing on their migration trajectories through overlapping waves of shock, relocation, and partial mobilization, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Initially, Turkey was an attractive destination due to its visa-free access, air connectivity, affordable cost of living, and established post-Soviet community. However, among the nearly one million people who fled Russia, many relocants – primarily young, educated, and entrepreneurial individuals from the information technology sector and oppositional groups – face various uncertainties in Turkey. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study, this research first examines the migration journeys of Russian relocants through their self-narratives, tracing the waves of the exodus in 2022. It then critically analyzes the legal, economic, and social uncertainties they encounter in Turkey. Finally, it explores how the physical and virtual "bubbles" formed in İstanbul function as coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges. Blending staying and returning, bubbles function as temporary "in-between" spaces, allowing Russian relocants to encounter Turkey's novelties, while maintaining a "transnational double presence" through ongoing ties to their homeland, resulting in a form of "functional adaptation."

Keywords: Russian relocants; virtual bubbles; physical bubbles; uncertainty; transnationalism; integration; functional adaptation; transnational double presence

Introduction

"This is the song 'Gurbet' (Longing), which I recently fell in love with," said Galina, a thirty-year-old team leader from St. Petersburg who works remotely for a Russian company and has been teaching online English lessons in İstanbul since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Released in 1973, the song Galina mentioned during the interview for this study captures the emotional struggles of Turkish workers who migrated to Germany in 1961. In 2021, to mark the sixtieth anniversary of migration, the song was reinterpreted in a music video on the YouTube channel Sing Germany (*Söyle Almanya*) as part of the project Sing for the Memories of 60 Years in Germany (*60 Yılın Hatırına Söyle Almanya*). It was reimagined once again in 2024 by young singer and influencer Ali Polat, who was born in 1998 in Erbil, Iraq, and migrated with his

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family during childhood due to political instability, spending time in Turkey before eventually settling in Germany. Like many long-time listeners, Galina connects deeply with this song, as it expresses her longing for her home in St. Petersburg – a place she avoids returning to, fearing the risk of being detained if she goes back to Russia. İstanbul offers her some comfort despite the uncertainties she has encountered, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Galina's experience echoes that of many Russians she has met in İstanbul, who are part of the nearly one million people who left Russia after the invasion (Kamalov et al. 2023).

Often referred to as the "third exodus," the waves of migration from Russia in 2022 are reminiscent of the exodus of the 1920s after the Russian Revolution and the exodus of the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, during each of which nearly one million people left their homeland (Gretskiy 2024). Most of the migrants in the 2022 exodus moved to post-Soviet nations such as Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, where Russians do not need a visa, or to countries like Turkey that allow entry with a tourist visa (Sergeeva and Kamalov 2024). A smaller proportion of migrants also reached more distant destinations in Southeast Asia and South America (Ruseishvili and Ryazentsev 2024).

The first two overlapping waves, arriving in the spring and summer of 2022, primarily consisted of young, educated, and entrepreneurial Russians, political activists, academics, and journalists, while information technology (IT) specialists and professionals confident in their global competitiveness often relocated even without a social or professional network (Gretskiy 2024). While the first two waves were motivated by opposition to the Putin regime, the third wave was sparked by the 2022 partial mobilization[1] and fears of conscription. Russians chose Turkey for its visa-free access, convenient flights, ease of financial transactions, and affordable cost of living, as sanctions limited access to Europe and complicated payments. Moreover, Turkey's lower levels of local resentment, a vibrant post-Soviet Russian-speaking community,[2] and its popularity as a top tourist destination attracted Russian newcomers arriving in shock and panic. Finally, departures from Turkey began in the spring of 2023, driven primarily by factors such as the uncertainties surrounding legal status, worsening economic conditions, and the authoritarian political climate in Turkey, as evidenced in falling numbers.[3] The ambiguous future and an unsettled present make uncertainty, transience, and instability central to their experience. Many as members

[1] Russia's partial mobilization was announced by President Vladimir Putin on September 21, 2022, following significant military setbacks in Ukraine's Kharkiv region. Aimed at conscripting 300,000 reservists with prior military experience, the measure was officially framed as a partial (limited) mobilization – rather than a full one – and triggered widespread protests. It marked Russia's first mobilization since World War II (BBC News 2022).

[2] The post-Soviet community in Turkey emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, facilitated by short-term visits, shuttle trade, long-term stays, and intermarriages (Deniz and Özgür 2021; Yükseker 2003). The shuttle trade emerged as an informal activity and survival strategy, while tourism led to an influx of "so-called tourists" (Yükseker 2003). Additionally, the growing number of Russian tourists solidified their presence and sparked other forms of migration, including lifestyle migration for retirement and intermarriage (Deniz and Özgür 2021). This flourishing cross-border mobility has strengthened transnational practices and led to the formation of Russian and post-Soviet communities in several Turkish cities, particularly İstanbul and Antalya (Deniz and Özgür 2021).

[3] The number of Russian residence permit holders in Turkey declined from 153,639 in 2022 to 100,847 in 2023, followed by a further decrease to 81,889 in 2024 (Presidency of Migration Management 2024).

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of Russia's "new middle class"[4] identify as "relocants" (*relokanty – релоканты*) and maintain strong social and economic ties to their homeland (Gudkov et al. 2024), yet they still remain in motion (Krawatzek and Sasse 2024).

Against this backdrop, drawing on findings from a qualitative study, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of Russian relocants in Turkey by tracing their migration trajectories during the 2022 exodus. It then critically examines their experiences, focusing on the legal, economic, and social uncertainties they face. Additionally, it explores how the physical and virtual bubbles formed in Kadıköy-Moda, İstanbul, function as coping mechanisms, simultaneously sustaining a "transnational double presence" and facilitating a form of "functional adaptation" to Turkey. To further this perspective, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by engaging with scholarship on uncertainty, forced migration, transnationalism, and integration, aiming to contribute to area studies and address existing gaps in the field.

Russian relocants: creating virtual and physical bubbles in Turkey

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars commonly define an international migrant as someone who leaves their home country intending or expecting to live elsewhere for a certain period, regardless of the reason. But, when people cross borders, their needs and rights are not always immediately clear, and determining whether someone qualifies as a refugee often requires a lengthy individual status determination process. Therefore, the term "migrant" is more inclusive, encompassing various factors of force and choice that influence migration, both within and beyond the refugee category (Carling 2023). In line with Carling's inclusive terminology (Carling 2023), the phrase "migrants, including refugees" is more precise, as it acknowledges that "migrants" can refer to individuals both with and without the right to protection as refugees.

The complexities of migration terminology have become particularly evident in the context of the war in Ukraine, as media, emerging scholarly literature, and interviews from this study reflect ongoing discussions about how Russian migrants define their identities. Subsequent academic research has revealed that many of the Russians refer to themselves as relocants to highlight the temporary or semi-permanent nature of their migration (Amiryan 2024; Inozemtsev 2023; Kostenko et al. 2023). It conveys a sense of voluntary departure, reflecting initial hopes that their displacement would be short-lived, mostly framed within broader categories of migrants or immigrants (Inozemtsev 2023). In this study, debates over the term "relocant" provided a lens to examine Russians' diverse perspectives on self-identification, particularly in the context of their new lives in Turkey.

Although many described their relocation as voluntary, relocants left due to forced circumstances – either directly because of political repression and partial mobilization, or indirectly due to the economic impact of sanctions on their professional lives, or because of less immediate political threats. While highlighting their voluntary move and ability to work, many reject the term "refugee," emphasizing that Ukrainians are the ones experiencing the war, and similarly resist

[4] Comprised of educated urban professionals, entrepreneurs, and private-sector employees, the new middle class, defined by a consumer-driven lifestyle, expanded in Russia in the 2000s (Mareeva 2020).

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being labeled "migrants" due to its association with post-Soviet migration, irregular routes, and economic hardship (Amiryan 2024). Thus, self-identification as relocants serves also as a psychological coping mechanism, offering a sense of agency and control over their situation.

Relocants reflect key characteristics of Russia's emerging "new middle class" which began to take shape in the 2000s as poverty rates fell due to expanded social support, wage stability, and economic growth (Mareeva 2020). Even before the invasion of Ukraine, this new middle class, along with politically active individuals, had already begun leaving Russia, as increasing political repression under Putin made it harder for professionals, particularly in IT, entrepreneurship, and creative industries, to thrive. This wave, often referred to as "significant elite Russian diasporas," "global Russians," or "professional Russians" (Ageeva and Akopov 2022; Korobkov 2022; Litovskaya and Litovskaya 2018), has expanded a transnational Russian network across multiple regions.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the resulting geopolitical crisis, the globalization of white-collar labor, the rise of a new middle class, increasing polarization in Russia, and strict laws against war criticism collectively drove the migration of highly skilled and opposition-minded Russians who felt increasingly disconnected from their society (Hanson and Baltabayeva 2025). Their migration is inherently marked by high levels of uncertainty, as it typically involves previously unplanned responses to worsening conditions (Maas et al. 2021).

In response to the uncertainties, which disrupt a person's sense of secure belonging, Russians in Georgia have leveraged economic privilege, fostering distinctive life-making practices that reflect elements of entrepreneurship-led diaspora building (Orjonikidze 2024), while Ukrainians in Germany have developed transnational mobility patterns (Lapshyna 2025). The uncertainty surrounding the war in Ukraine, along with the complexities of living in Turkey, have created significant ambiguity regarding Russian relocants' intentions to stay, return, or integrate in this new environment. Relocants have created their own virtual and physical "bubbles," sustaining a strong "double presence" (Vianello 2013) within transnational workspaces across Turkey and Russia, as well as within their family networks. In other words, the bubbles they create in Turkey, such as the one in Kadıköy-Moda in İstanbul, serve as a protective space while enabling limited yet functional interaction with Turkish society.

The bubbles are fragile and can burst at any moment, yet, when intact, they shield those inside from external influences (Gaggiotti et al. 2023). This metaphor offers temporary spaces for individuals on the move, with seemingly strong boundaries that give shelter from the surrounding complexity (Zaban 2015). It goes beyond the concept of "diaspora," which refers to cohesive communities bound by a shared "diasporic consciousness," increasingly shaped by transnational practices (Faist and Bilecen 2019). It also extends beyond the concept of "enclaves," which preserve strong ties to the home country while often remaining isolated from the host society (Zaban 2015). Whether virtual or physical, the bubble metaphor highlights a hybrid existence where migrants are neither fully integrated nor completely separate from the host society. It functions as transitional "in-between" space, enabling migrants to engage with the host country's novelties while maintaining transnational ties to their home community.

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Research has highlighted the formation of "bubbles" among globally mobile employees and professionals, where expatriates primarily socialize within their own communities rather than integrating into the host society (Lauring and Selmer 2009). However, the rise of social media and rapid information exchange has transformed isolated, localized bubbles into more interconnected and dynamic spaces (Srinivasan and Pyati 2007; van Bakel 2024). In this shifting landscape, migrants are no longer confined to physical and virtual bubbles but instead move fluidly among them as their needs and circumstances evolve (Kars-Unluoglu et al. 2023). Similarly, Russian relocants in Turkey created fluid and evolving physical and virtual bubbles, flexible, adaptable, and shaped by shifting needs and circumstances. Preserving their global networks and transnational ties, such "functional adaptation" (Mierina and Laudere 2023) ensures their comfort in daily life, while also enabling them to transcend, reshape, or exit the "bubbles" they typically inhabit. They exist in a liminal "in-between" space, navigating the boundary between the native and the foreign (Thomassen 2009), thereby challenging the notion of prolonged uncertainty.

Method and data collection

This study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted between September 2023 and June 2024, combining ethnographic observation with in-depth interviews and expert consultations. Primary data were gathered through twenty-one face-to-face interviews with Russian relocants in İstanbul, a small focus group meeting (with four officials), and eleven semi-structured interviews with experts across İstanbul, Ankara, and Antalya. The interviews centered on three main themes: migration trajectories to Turkey, everyday experiences of living and working in Turkey, and future plans.

Initial contact with participants began with a visit to a Russian bookstore in Kadıköy, İstanbul, followed by snowball sampling to expand the pool of interviewees. As part of the ethnographic component, I visited and observed both newly established venues – such as coffee shops, bookstores, and social spaces – and long-standing Russian-run establishments, including restaurants, shops, and spiritual sites like Orthodox churches, particularly within the Kadıköy-Moda area, to explore what I conceptualize as the "Kadıköy-Moda bubble."

The relocants interviewed were between the ages of twenty and forty-eight years, including nine women, ten men, and two participants who self-identified as LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or other). They were predominantly professionals in IT, small business owners, journalists, or activists. Most had previously lived, studied, or worked in major Russian cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod. The interviews were conducted primarily in English, with two participants demonstrating notable fluency in Turkish. A follow-up round of interviews was conducted in January 2025 to further enrich the empirical material.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from İstanbul Ticaret University. All participants gave informed consent, including permission to use anonymized data for research purposes. While most had no objection to name disclosure, a few requested anonymity; thus, pseudonyms are used throughout. As the majority declined voice recording, the analysis draws heavily on detailed field notes.

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Expert interviews brought together a diverse range of perspectives: a representative from the Russian Embassy in Ankara (interviewed in İstanbul), leaders of Russian-speaking migrant organizations, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, professionals from the tourism and retail sectors, Orthodox parish priests, academics, and journalists based in İstanbul and Antalya, as well as an academic based in Moscow whom I interviewed online. Additionally, I conducted interviews with officials from Turkish state institutions in Ankara, including the Ministry of Interior, the Presidency of Migration Management, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. A small focus group meeting was also organized in İstanbul with four officials from the Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK), including members of the Turkey–Russia and Eurasia Business Councils.

Against this background, the research is guided by two key questions: how are the migration experiences of Russian relocants to Turkey, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, shaped across overlapping waves of shock, relocation, and partial mobilization? How do legal, economic, and social uncertainties in Turkey shape the spatial and transnational adaptation strategies of Russian relocants, particularly through the formation of physical and virtual "bubbles" in İstanbul?

To Turkey: Russian relocants, neither refugee nor migrant

In this section I explore the migration trajectories of Russian relocants to Turkey through their self-narratives across the waves of shock, relocation, and partial mobilization These narratives reveal how these individuals resist identifying as refugees or migrants, instead labeling themselves as "relocants," and how they articulate their journeys within the broader context of uncertainty. This framing provides insight into how the dynamics of functional adaptation develop, while also offering indications of why and how the notion of transnational double presence emerges, influencing their experiences both in Turkey and through persistent social, emotional, and symbolic connections to Russia.

The wave of shock: "What if borders are closed?"

The initial wave of migration from Russia was triggered by the immediate shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022 (Rapoport 2024). The invasion sparked anti-war protests across multiple cities, which were swiftly suppressed by intensified state repression, escalating constant fear of persecution. In a state of shock, urgency, and panic, this first wave of migration began in the spring and was soon followed by a second wave in the summer, driven by the effects of rapidly imposed Western sanctions (Kamalov et al. 2022). While the initial wave included activists, artists, academics, media and NGO workers, along with IT specialists, the second wave saw an even larger outflow of IT professionals, businesspeople, and managers – members of the new middle class, opposition groups, and those with opposition-minded views (Gretskiy 2024).

Daria, a twenty-seven-year-old florist and political activist from St. Petersburg who had long supported Alexei Navalny, the outspoken political opponent of the Putin regime as well as the feminist movement, was among those forced to leave

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Russia after the shock of the invasion. Upon hearing the news, she immediately attempted to join the protests that had erupted across several cities.

> I was just on my way and hadn't even reached the protest site yet. Along the way, the police spotted me and took me onto their bus as I was carrying blue and yellow balloons. Honestly, I was the first one they detained ... They took us to the police station and released us 24 hours later. Rumors about border closures started spreading like wildfire ... I couldn't even stay in my new apartment. I called my friends in İstanbul and could only find a flight through Minsk. I had to spend my last money on a COVID-19 test there. So, I arrived in İstanbul with no money at all.

Her friends in İstanbul welcomed her into their homes, and she resided with one of them for a couple of months. Similarly, Yuri, a thirty-two-year-old online English lecturer from Yekaterinburg, left for İstanbul, believing that returning is no longer an option due to the ongoing repression. As an LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other) activist, Yuri described how the invasion of Ukraine further escalated persecution against LGBTQI+ individuals, with laws banning "LGBT propaganda" and restricting the public expression of LGBTQI+ identities, making it nearly impossible to live openly.[5] While he expressed a deep sense of despair, he also acknowledged his fortune in securing a flight to İstanbul just one day before the partial mobilization was announced.

The interviewees described how panic and urgency influenced their decision to migrate, with rumors of border closures, intensified by social media, and a deep-rooted fear stemming from Soviet history, reinforcing the belief that the government could seal the borders at any moment. Despite sanctions suspending all flights between Russia and European Union countries by March 2022, destinations like Minsk, Yerevan, and İstanbul remained accessible, though soaring ticket prices posed additional challenges. Most interviewees selected their destinations based on available flights, and, like Daria, some had to pass through multiple countries before finally reaching Turkey. Aware that returning meant the risk of arrest, Daria and Yuri had not considered applying for refugee status, uncertain about when or how they might return. Like them, opposition-minded interviewees who left in the aftermath of the initial shock identify as political immigrants or politically active relocants but hesitate to call themselves refugees. They viewed their migration as a panicked yet voluntary search for safety and freedom. "How can I go back and live a normal life in Russia, knowing that people are suffering and dying in Ukraine? I don't see myself as a refugee, but staying away is, in some way, the only form of protest I feel I still have," said Oksana, a thirty-year-old assistant manager from Moscow. Oksana, Yuri, and Daria continued working online for various clients or institutions in Russia, while living in İstanbul. Their digital ties to Russia, sustained through remote work, became a key element of their transnational lives (Vianello 2013).

[5] The law expanding Russia's restrictions on the promotion of what it calls "LGBT propaganda" effectively outlaws any public expression of LGBT behavior or lifestyle in Russia (Reuters 2023).

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The wave of relocation: "What if the internet is shut down?"

The shock was further intensified by the rapid imposition of sanctions on Russia, sparking another wave of migration in the summer of 2022. Export controls on high-tech equipment and restrictions on digital services severed Russia's access to global platforms and payment systems. The escalating internet censorship (a process that had begun in 2012) led to widespread website blockages and a ban on social media platforms (Amiryan 2024). Consequently, many IT specialists found their work unsustainable due to restricted access to company servers and international operations. In response, companies began relocating as a strategic move to circumvent sanctions and political pressures, prompting an outflow of professionals – including IT specialists, engineers, businesspeople, and managers – seeking stability and continued access to global markets (Sergeeva and Kamalov 2024). This migration was especially prominent among the new middle class, whose careers and livelihoods were closely tied to global networks and opportunities, making relocation a necessary step for maintaining their professional and economic standing.

Boris, a forty-year-old digital nomad from Moscow, viewed the sanctions as the final push to leave. Recalling his decision, he explained:

> I've witnessed war and understood its impact. As a child, I was there during the Chechen war. War is devastating and incredibly difficult. When I first heard about the invasion, I didn't believe it. Initially, I thought it would be over quickly, but soon realized it wasn't and then sanctions were imposed. That's when I decided to leave – I just want to live in peace, not in war, not under sanctions. I work online, internet restrictions have impacted my work and earnings, and I feared things could get worse.

Boris distanced himself from opposition movements, saying, "I hate politics. I hate war. Of course, I have friends who went to those rallies, and that's their choice. But I'm not that kind of person." Feeling as though he is on an extended vacation without knowing when it will end, he prefers to identify as a relocant rather than a "migrant," associating it with low-status labor migration from former Soviet countries like Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan.

Unlike Boris who was apathetic towards politics, Sasha, a thirty-year-old director at an international company in Moscow, is a businessperson with ties to the Libertarian Party of Russia. He successfully oversaw his duty-free office's transition to Turkey, while other branches of the company struggled to do the same. Although he gradually distanced himself from direct political involvement before relocating, he later became partially active in Kovcheg's[6] educational programs in İstanbul and considers himself a politically active relocant.

Ludmilla, a twenty-nine-year-old from St. Petersburg, said:

[6] As an international initiative, the Ark (Kovcheg) was founded in 2022 in response to the exclusion of Russians who oppose the war in Ukraine. It offers legal and psychological support, integration assistance, and language courses. The Ark has set up temporary shelters in İstanbul, Yerevan, Warsaw, Astana, Aktobe, and Almaty. More information is available at https://kovcheg.live/en/about-us/ (accessed 22 July 2025).

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> My economic conditions are very different from those of migrants in Russia. I can work independently. This is my choice – I'm a relocant, not a migrant. Migrants often face serious challenges – struggling to secure stable jobs and meet their basic daily needs. If you go to the Moscow metro, you can easily spot them.

Many interviewees like Ludmilla and Boris sought to distance themselves from the post-Soviet association of "migrant" with low-skilled laborers. Identifying as relocants, they emphasize their professional independence and self-sufficiency.

The wave of partial mobilization: "What if the government drafts?"

The third wave of migration was driven by Putin's announcement of partial mobilization in the fall of 2022 (Gudkov et al. 2024). This wave primarily consisted of military-age men facing the shock of conscription, including not only members of the new middle class and opposition groups but also those who were never openly against the government's foreign policy. The exodus spread rapidly and faded within two to three weeks, with Georgia and Kazakhstan being the nearest neighboring countries to relocate to (Gretskiy 2024). Ilya, a twenty-eight-year-old sales manager for an IT company from Svetlogorsk in Kaliningrad, chose to take a land route through Kazakhstan, hoping for a smoother exit, as flight prices had skyrocketed. His journey began with a flight to Orenburg, a Russian border city near Kazakhstan, where he attempted to cross into Aktobe, a city in western Kazakhstan close to the Russian border.

> The land journey was the only option for me. Normally, the trip from Orenburg to Aktobe takes about three hours, but long queues at the border turned it into a twenty-three-hour nightmare. There were cars, taxis, buses . . . I even saw cars with the "Z" (a pro-war emblem used to show support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine) symbol. Along the way, I found out that Georgian border guards weren't allowing cars with ribbons or symbols of the Russian invasion to cross. At random border checks, military personnel would board the bus, do a quick search, and then leave. That was the luckiest moment of my life.

From Aktobe, he continued his journey to Astana, then to Almaty. After spending three months in Almaty, Ilya eventually made his way to Antalya, but the "unbearable" heat led him to relocate to İstanbul, not realizing how expensive the city would be. Mikhail, a thirty-year-old from Astrakhan, a city located on the delta of the Volga River near the Caspian Sea, faced similar shock and uncertainty. While working in Moscow as a technical project manager and in marketing, he realized by September 25, 2022 that he needed to leave the city. Mikhail swiftly booked a 3,500 United States dollar (USD) ticket to İstanbul transiting through Dubai and left Moscow on September 28. Unlike Mikhail, twenty-seven-year-old Sergei, a software engineer from Moscow, could not find a flight to Turkey. After waiting for a while and still unable to book a flight, he first moved to Egypt, then to Antalya. From there, he traveled to Cappadocia, a region in Central Anatolia known for its fairy chimneys, hoping the visit would help him recover from the shock of conscription.

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While working online, Sergei eventually decided to move to İstanbul to reunite with his friends there.

From the shock of sudden conscription to the complex logistical challenges of migration, the experiences of interviewees like Ilya, Mikhail, and Sergei underscore the hectic decision-making process that led them to seek safety and stability abroad, while identifying as relocants, emphasizing their professional autonomy over labels like "migrants" or "refugees." As a result, the interviews with Russian relocants reflect a unique blend of experiences often characterized by shock or panic yet still having the resources to rebuild a similar life elsewhere. However, upon arriving in Turkey, Russian relocants face various uncertainties in their legal status, and in economic and social spheres, leading to new coping strategies that reinforce their double presence across both countries.

In Turkey: Russian relocants and uncertainty in daily life

This second part delves into Russian relocants' daily experiences, focusing on the legal, economic, and social uncertainties they face in Turkey. Russian nationals are permitted to enter Turkey without a visa for stays of up to ninety days within any 180-day period. To remain in Turkey legally beyond this timeframe, they must apply for a short-term residence permit in accordance with Turkish immigration laws. However, many interviewees mentioned that getting a permit can be difficult due to the unpredictable approval process and the ongoing risk of deportation. This section thus examines how living with temporary legal status and the threat of deportation contributes to a heightened sense of uncertainty for Russian relocants in Turkey.

Living with temporary legal status: "Soon, I'll be saying goodbye to İstanbul"

Interviews revealed that while residence permit applications for Russian nationals were processed smoothly in 2022, the situation changed in mid-2023, with more rejections and permits increasingly limited to six months instead of a year. Ivan, a thirty-five-year-old IT specialist from Nizhny Novgorod, shared the challenges he faced in obtaining a residence permit:

> The first year was great, but things began to change afterward without any reason. In 2022, I submitted all the required documents and got the permit – it was really easy. Then I started hearing that getting permits had become more difficult. You either get a six-month permit or none at all. At first, I thought it was just a rumor or maybe people were missing some documents. But then, in 2023, I ended up getting only a six-month residence permit. It's really unsettling. Soon, I'll be saying goodbye to İstanbul, like the Russians did a hundred years ago.

Ivan recalls the White Russians who fled to İstanbul after the Bolshevik Revolution but eventually moved on – and sees himself following a similar path. Nathalia, thirty-eight years old, from Yaroslav, living with her family in İstanbul, and working as a makeup artist and Instagram influencer, expressed frustration, stating, "If there were any additional rules, *Göç İdaresi* [Presidency of Migration Management] could tell us,

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and we would do what we need to do. But there's no logic to it, and it really makes life difficult." As highlighted by my interviewees, uncertainty in the residence permit process complicates long-term planning, leaving relocants unsure whether their permits will be renewed. This legal ambiguity was the main driver behind their concerns, with the ongoing threat of deportation further intensifying these fears.

Living under the threat of deportation: "We call it 'Turkish randomness!' No one knows whose turn it will be!"

Since mid-2023, the tightening of residence permit issuance and stricter controls on irregular migration have made deportation an additional risk for Russian newcomers. As noted by an expert from the Presidency of Migration Management whom I interviewed, following the 2023 presidential election and in response to increasing anti-migrant sentiment and efforts to control irregular migration, "sweeping" (*süpürme*) operations were initiated, beginning in İstanbul as a pilot area and later expanding to other cities, including Antalya. Mobile migration points were established in densely populated areas – such as metro stations, main streets, and busy shopping districts – to identify and remove irregular migrants. Random inspections at these points often led to deportation for those violating residency regulations. Russians faced this threat as well. By the time of the interview, Sergei – unable to find a flight to Turkey in 2022 – had already purchased a return ticket, overwhelmed by fear of irregular status.

> I didn't get the extension for my residence permit on my second application. Even though my earnings have increased, they still rejected it! Without any status, I feel terrified and stressed – this situation is really difficult! One Friday night, while I was at the metro station, the police asked for my ID. I was so scared! Because I thought, being blonde, I am looking like a tourist and I might not get questioned, as I know many Syrians have been deported in İstanbul. I panicked and told the police I would return to Russia. He simply said: "Go and get your tickets as soon as possible." You know, he could deport me as well! It's ridiculous. That night, I decided to return!

The ambiguous and uncertain context left the status of Russians vague; despite their desire not to be irregular, many found themselves in such a position. Maxim, a thirty-three-year-old engineer from Moscow, said

> We call it "Turkish randomness!" No one knows whose turn it will be. *Göç İdaresi* can reject your application without any explanation, or they may issue only a six-month residence permit again without any clear reason. Your application could take longer or shorter, and nobody knows what to expect. In places like Taksim, Kadıköy, or on buses or trains on the way to your home, the police can ask to see your documents.

The threat of deportation creates uncertainty about the future (De Genova 2019), while this uncertainty also disrupts present engagement in ways that are not easily overcome (Dennler 2023). Thus, the majority of my interviewees strongly felt a

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sense of temporariness and the threat of deportation, leading to heightened uncertainty.

Uncertainty and instability in the working life

Following the invasion, many Russians have relocated their companies, started businesses, or taken jobs, particularly in the IT sector, digital services, and e-commerce, driving growth in these industries. At the same time, the real estate market in Antalya and İstanbul has boomed, driven by increased property investments by Russian newcomers and the rise of Russian-owned real estate agencies catering them.[7] In addition, private tutoring platforms serving both Russians and locals have also expanded. In a focus group meeting with DEİK at the beginning of 2023, experts highlighted the potential opportunities brought by Russian newcomers' companies (relocated) in sectors such as technology (IT and digital services), tourism, and retail.

This new environment has also fostered collaboration Russian, Ukrainian, and Turkish entrepreneurs, particularly towards the end of 2022. These ventures serve a wide spectrum of needs among Russian relocants, ranging from casual cafés and beauty salons to pilates studios. The interviews revealed that beyond the professional sectors, some Russians also turn to informal (freelance) work, either while remotely employed by Russian companies or by taking on short-term jobs in Turkey.

Working formally in an uncertain economy: "Suddenly, your taxes, rent, or even the price of the coffee you drink could double!"

Economic uncertainties in Turkey have had a disruptive impact on the interviewees' working lives. Andrei, a forty-year-old high-level manager at a relocated Russian company in İstanbul, described the deteriorating conditions:

> I'm from Moscow, so I know all about excessive bureaucracy! (He laughs.) In Turkey, there's really a lot of it. But what's even worse is that there are no clear or consistent rules – everything can change in a minute, for no reason and with no logic. Suddenly, your taxes, rent, or even the price of the coffee you drink could double! That's what worries me. This unpredictability is the real problem. If you're trying to do business, you need clear rules. Running a business in such a highly inflationary economy with unstable rules and regulations just creates even more uncertainty.

Viktor, thirty-two years old, from Moscow works in a hybrid model for a relocated Russian IT company with a Turkish partner in İstanbul. He shares a flat in Maltepe with his Russian friend, who works remotely for a multinational IT company based in the Netherlands. Despite their high qualifications and transnational ties, they, like Andrei, face challenges that complicate daily life. For instance, they shared how even simple tasks, like opening a bank account, are hindered by inconsistent bank

[7] Russians emerged as the top international buyers of real estate in Turkey, with 16,312 purchases in 2022. The number of Russian-operated real estate companies surged from 177 to 1,363 – a 670 percent increase from 2021, with 720 new registrations in the first half of 2022 alone (Karaçay 2023).

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regulations, one requiring a 1,000 USD deposit and another asking for 3,000 USD. Roman, a forty-eight-year-old entrepreneur from Moscow, founded his own company in İstanbul. Now living in Kadıköy, he had initially planned to move to the United States (USA), drawing on his transnational expertise and global networks. He explained how companies develop strategies to overcome these challenges.

> Many companies move their branches to Turkey and have their employees work remotely. But the authoritarian government and economic difficulties make things tough for them. Most see Turkey as a temporary solution while they sort out paperwork to open branches in Europe. Since that takes time, employees keep working remotely from Turkey, using local online services to get around sanctions on Russia. Once they get approval, they move both their branches and employees to Europe. So, for these companies, Turkey is just a stop along the way to Europe.

Thus, the interviewees shared that the uncertainty and unpredictability in Turkish bureaucracy and the highly inflationary economy, with unstable rules and procedures, have placed an excessive burden on relocants. According to the interviewees' observations, the growth of Russian-funded companies that began in 2022 came to a standstill in 2023. My interview at the İstanbul Chamber of Commerce confirmed a sharp decline in Russian-established companies in İstanbul: 896 were founded in 2022, followed by an almost 50 percent drop in 2023, and a further 85 percent decrease in 2024. While working in Turkey, interviewees maintain their transnational economic ties with Russia, either by taking additional online or remote jobs, or by engaging in freelance work. Simultaneously, they use their transnational and global networks to expand job opportunities, seeking to improve their working conditions, which are often constrained by uncertainties in Turkey.

Working informally in an uncertain economy: "As a director from Moscow, I can only take short-term jobs in İstanbul!"

The interviewees discussed the challenges Russian relocants face when entering the Turkish labor market, particularly language barriers, unrecognized qualifications, and a lack of social connections. These obstacles often push many toward informal, short-term jobs within the Russian-speaking community, where their qualifications are frequently devalued. Elena, aged twenty-eight years from St. Petersburg, who could not continue to work in her own field, works at a Russian-owned café/bookstore in Kadıköy. She said, "As a director from Moscow, I can only take short-term jobs in İstanbul, and the high prices and inflation make it nearly impossible to keep up with the limited job opportunities available to me." Some interviewees engage in informal (freelance) work across various fields, including translation, digital content creation, yoga instruction, gymnastics coaching, language teaching, makeup artistry, nail care, and piano lessons, offering their services either to a broader audience or exclusively to Russian-speaking clients. Uncertain about their job prospects, the interviewees work in remote and freelance informal jobs simultaneously to boost their income, yet this creates instability and disruption in their careers.

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Whether formally or informally employed in Turkey, most interviewees stressed that they sustain ties to Russia through ongoing social and professional networks, as well as through various forms of online work. This dynamic reinforces a form of transnational double presence (Vionello 2013), whereby they remain simultaneously embedded – socially, economically, and affectively – in both Russia and Turkey. "I don't want to lose my students," said Yuri, who has been teaching English in Yekaterinburg for several years, both in-person and online. Like Yuri, the majority of the interviewees emphasized the continued importance of their social and economic ties with Russia.

Uncertainty and unrest in social life

Many relocants expressed anxiety over unpredictable government policies toward foreigners, feeling constrained by the authoritarian political climate and uncertain about how to navigate challenges related to their unclear legal status and unstable economy. Uncertainty surrounding residency permits has become one of the most immediate and pressing challenges. As a coping strategy, interviews revealed that relocating to less regulated areas in cities such as İzmir, Adana, Mersin, or Trabzon has become a viable alternative, providing Russians with a sense of freedom. Additionally, some have chosen to study in Turkey, not just for educational purposes, but as another coping strategy. For some, student visas help overcome residence permit challenges, while for others, they serve as a way to avoid partial mobilization. This trend is evident in the increase of Russian students in Turkish universities, with numbers rising from 3,140 to 4,868 in the 2023–2024 academic year, including a growth in male students from 1,722 to 2,689 (Council of Higher Education 2024).

Interviewees consistently noted rising rents, increasing school fees, and high inflation as significant financial burdens. The real estate agents interviewed in İstanbul and Antalya attributed the rise in property prices partly to Russians purchasing homes or renting property in USD or euros, often paying in six-month or one-year instalments. As a result, these situations have sparked public resentment, especially in areas like Antalya, where locals, who had lived in their homes for years, are now being asked to pay higher rents. Interviews with academics in İstanbul and Moscow suggest that this resentment may be contributing to stricter residence permit regulations. A prominent Russian civil society organization in İstanbul, established in the early 2000s, supports this perspective, pointing out that the decreasing number of residence permits granted to Russians may not only be a result of local policy changes but could also indicate pressure from the Russian government to discourage long-term stays abroad.

Furthermore, in June 2022, the initiation of the "dilution policy" (*seyreltme politikası*) restricted Russian relocants from renting in certain neighborhoods. The policy aimed to reduce migrant concentration in densely populated urban areas by restricting foreign residency, designating nearly 1,200 neighborhoods – including sections of İstanbul and Antalya – as prohibited zones for foreign resident registration. Even with a rental contract, they are not allowed to obtain a residence permit. Consequently, many interviewees sought alternatives, such as sharing homes with friends or relocating to more affordable districts. An official from the Russian

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Embassy in Ankara confirmed in an interview at the Russian Consulate in İstanbul that those who initially settled in upscale districts like Beyoğlu, Beşiktaş, Şişli, and Kadıköy have since moved to less costly neighborhoods like Avcılar, Beylikdüzü, Kartal, and Maltepe. In Antalya, areas like Yeni Mahalle and Kepez have gained popularity for affordable housing, along with established areas such as Alanya and Konyaaltı.

The financial strain is further compounded by rising school fees. Janna from Stavropol living with her family in İstanbul noted that parents are opting for online or informal homeschooling to ease the burden. She enrolled her four-year-old in a private kindergarten but quickly found the costs unsustainable: "Now we're part of a Turkish–Russian WhatsApp playgroup where my daughter picks up Russian, Turkish, and English naturally. It's more affordable, she's happier, and her Turkish is even better than mine."

As Janna mentioned, for some, homeschooling is a temporary solution until they decide on their future in Turkey or relocate elsewhere, while for others it has become a long-term strategy to maintain their children's connection to Russian education and culture. Amid ongoing uncertainty, this approach also reflects a form of transnational double presence, enabling families to remain embedded in the social, cultural, and educational systems of their country of origin while physically residing abroad – illustrating what Vianello (2013) conceptualizes as a transnational double presence.

While feeling welcomed in Turkey, most interviewees noted that their experiences in Turkey contrasted with those of their friends in post-Soviet countries or Western Europe, where tensions over jobs and housing – heightened by Russia's geopolitical legacy – are more pronounced (Sahadeo 2024). As Irina who arrived in İstanbul from Moscow in February 2022 and has been teaching online English and Russian physics lectures to students in Russia, put it, "Locals don't really care whether you are Ukrainian or Russian. For them, mentioning Russia is more about Putin, Dostoevsky, and vodka than about the ongoing war." But many interviewees also expressed frustration with inflated prices and perceived exploitation in housing, residence permits, and local services. Thus, they remain closely connected to family and professional networks in Russia, maintaining a transnational double presence through digital communication, remote work, and occasional visits.

From Turkey ahead: Russian relocants in motion

Since mid-2023 an increasing number of Russians have sought to relocate to other countries. The war's unpredictable future, political repression in and sanctions on Russia, alongside uncertain legal and economic conditions in Turkey, influence their decisions (The Moscow Times 2023). Interviewees noted considering destinations like the USA, Serbia, or Georgia, as well as Dubai, United Arab Emirates, but high costs and travel restrictions limit these options, leaving many in a state of uncertainty. As a result, for some of the interviewees, adapting to immediate instability has become more pressing than future planning. Thus, Turkey has increasingly become a temporary stopover rather than a long-term destination. In this context, Russian relocants typically form and rely on their own social circles, or virtual and physical "bubbles."

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Virtual bubbles: "You can find it from the internet!"

The virtual bubbles – online spaces and networks of people with shared interests or backgrounds – often take shape in digital spaces, primarily on platforms like Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media and messaging applications. According to interviews, before migration, Russian relocants used these digital spaces to maintain social ties and gather information on legal and practical matters, such as residence permits and the cost of living. After migration, they relied even more heavily on them for real-time updates and advice, particularly on four key areas: legal issues, housing, job opportunities, and the education system. For example, Elena and Ludmilla from St. Petersburg and Oksana and Irina from Moscow explained how easy it is to find Russian speakers for daily needs. "You can order homemade Russian food made by a *babushka*, find a Russian-speaking babysitter, or even book a Russian hairdresser or nail artist – most of them are newcomers," said Irina.

Social media plays a crucial role in connecting relocants with the local community, especially when in-person interactions through work or education are limited. These platforms not only provide access to freelance job opportunities but also allow for the creation of specialized groups, such as closed WhatsApp chats for Russians (e.g. babysitters or nail artists) or open groups for locals (e.g. digital creators, language teachers, or gym trainers). Language barriers and unfamiliar school systems present significant challenges for parents trying to assist with their children's education. Social media offers a space for parents to share experiences, find resources, and connect with others facing similar struggles. Beyond the virtual bubbles, spaces such as churches, cafés, and bookstores play a key role in the formation of the physical bubble, as observed in the Kadıköy-Moda neighborhood.

The Kadıköy-Moda bubble: in between staying and returning

On İstanbul's Asian side, the Kadıköy district is home to Moda, a vibrant neighborhood and a popular residential area known for its cosmopolitan vibe and middle-to-upper-class, secular lifestyle. Its seaside streets form a lively hub, where churches and historic bakeries sit alongside trendy cafés, galleries, and art spaces. Meeting at Aya Andrea Church, nestled atop a nineteenth-century apartment building where some wall paintings were created by White Russians during their stay in İstanbul, Ludmilla, a twenty-nine-year-old from St. Petersburg, for instance, mentioned that attending the church, despite not being religious, evokes pleasant memories of her childhood, including the familiar smells and sounds of St. Petersburg. Interviewees disclosed that for some, this time is dedicated to worship, while for others, it serves as a moment of nostalgia and a way to address homesickness. However, some interviewees believe that church activities might be monitored, as generally churches have largely maintained their loyalty to the Kremlin.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, apart from spiritual spaces, cafés, art spaces, and bookstores – often run by Russians, Ukrainians, or Turks – sprang up quickly in Moda, becoming common sights along the streets. These lively spots in Moda strengthen social and financial support among Russian relocants by hosting exhibitions, panels, and writer meetups. Local announcements on the walls create an inclusive space, though rarely visited by natives. Events like music performances, concerts, and film screenings across various venues in Moda contribute to a vibrant

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cultural scene. Flyers for young Russian-initiated music bands can often be seen on the streets of Kadıköy. Boris, who experienced the Chechen war, plays guitar in one of these bands, while Mikhail from Astrakhan and his girlfriend, a student at a private university in İstanbul, are singers in another band.

Moda has emerged as a significant cultural hub, hosting not only emerging Russian music groups but also well-known anti-war artists. In 2022, renowned Russian rap singer Oxxymoron's "Russia Against the War" performance and well-known rock singer Zemfira's concerts in İstanbul, before their designation as "foreign agents," became important acts of resistance, fostering solidarity within the Russian-speaking community. These concerts continued through 2023 and 2024, becoming powerful symbols of protest against the war, with tickets selling out within minutes and drawing attendees from various countries. However, despite such acts of solidarity, the Russian anti-war movement in exile remains fragmented along political, ethnic, and generational lines (Krawatzek and Sasse 2024; Olimpieva 2024). Traces of political engagement and solidarity – albeit limited – are also evident. In August 2024, a US–Russia prisoner exchange in Ankara, mediated by Turkey, secured the release of prominent Russian opposition figures, reigniting debates on the rights of ordinary Russians affected by the war (RFE 2024). It may be said that opposition groups in Turkey face constraints by an authoritarian government with close ties to Russia. In response, they engage in low-profile activism, relying on personal connections and trust, with activists depending on informal networks for support and information. For instance, Kovcheg in İstanbul focuses on practical assistance, helping Russian relocants find jobs, secure housing, and navigate daily challenges. Sofia, a thirty-year-old from St. Petersburg, working at Kovcheg İstanbul, reflects:

> At first, I had hope, but now ... I thought İstanbul could become a hub for change, or at least a platform for our voices. A city rich in history, from Byzantine to Ottoman, filled with art, and a vibrant metropolis with diverse cultures. But over time, we realized we had just moved from one authoritarian environment to another. Most of my friends left İstanbul.

This situation leaves political opponents in uncertainty, as they weigh political engagement against the risks of residency denial, monitoring, and deportation. Svetlana, twenty-eight years old, from Russia Against the War said:

> I remember a "Russia Against the War" gathering in Antalya where people came from all over the world. This is one of the important gatherings for us. People from Georgia, from Armenia, from Europe came to Turkey. But interestingly, we from Turkey were fewer in number compared to other groups coming from abroad. So this was a distracting experience for us. Even though I know that we are few, realizing in this way was not good. I think that says it all.

The Kadıköy-Moda bubble illustrates how relocants attempt to navigate the uncertainties of everyday life by occupying a liminal position – simultaneously within and outside the urban and social fabric of the city. While this cosmopolitan and culturally diverse district offers access to various social and cultural resources,

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ongoing uncertainties and the broader context of authoritarian governance have significantly limited avenues for political engagement. Moreover, interviewees' narratives indicate that, although many maintain ties with Russia, they are increasingly inclined to consider onward migration to a third country (second migration) rather than returning to Russia.

In between staying and returning: transnational double presence and functional adaptation

Despite Russian relocants' high visibility in Moda, the interviewees did not see themselves as part of a "Russian diaspora" or perceive Moda as an "enclave" or a symbolic hub for their collective identity. Instead, they view the post-Soviet community in İstanbul primarily through the lens of marriage migration (between Turkish and Russian citizens), which they consider to be more traditional, while identifying themselves with a more liberal and modern lifestyle. They emphasize their openness, individualism, global networks, political engagement, and transnational ties, with most opposing the war. For them, Moda is a space where they can connect with like-minded individuals who share Western values, secular lifestyles, and an appreciation for art, culture, peace, and democracy. It serves as a place for personal expression, political engagement, and social interaction without the constraints of a defined community.

They embody the values and practices of the new middle class – renting apartments with sea views, frequenting cafés, and paying for household services. Their social life blends solidarity and cultural engagement, including organizing events, concerts, and fairs, while also prioritizing family-oriented activities such as home visits, birthday celebrations, and walks, often centered around their children.

Consequently, they are not entirely isolated, nor have they built their lives exclusively around other Russian relocants. Sasha, working for an international company in İstanbul, primarily socializes with Russian friends but received help from a Turkish colleague in finding housing upon his arrival. Authoritarianism and lack of democracy in both countries have left him increasingly depressed, prompting him to consider relocating to another European country. He postpones learning Turkish, limiting its use to basic daily interactions, as he remains unsure about staying or returning. Similarly, twenty-year-old Maria, a student in İstanbul and a singer in a Russian band, performs at venues for primarily Russian-speaking audiences but relies on her Turkish student friends for help with registration and other matters and says that she has one close Turkish friend.

Many engage with locals to some extent, whether through work, daily interactions, or occasional friendships. This creates a dual dynamic, allowing them to stay connected to their own transnational ties and networks, while maintaining a degree of engagement with the broader society. Rather than integration, this reflects a process of "fitting in," where "functional adaptation" ensures ease in daily life (Mierina and Laudere 2023). Relocants move fluidly between bubbles, experiencing no personal or social conflict in leaving them or engaging with locals. These practices reinforce their transnational double presence (Vianello 2013), enabling them to remain socially and professionally embedded in both contexts simultaneously.

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Conclusion

This article explored how Russian relocants perceive and respond to the uncertainties they face in Turkey by creating virtual and physical bubbles, ultimately forming a fluid, dynamic network that sustains their transnational ties. In this study, debates surrounding the term relocant serve as a lens to examine Russians' self-narratives and migration trajectories, especially in the context of their new lives in Turkey. Although many described their relocation as voluntary, they actually left due to forced circumstances – either directly because of political repression or partial mobilization, or indirectly due to the economic impact of sanctions. They reject the label "refugee," asserting that Ukrainians are the true victims of the war, and resist being categorized as "migrants" due to this term's associations with post-Soviet migration, irregular routes, and economic hardship. Therefore, identifying as relocants also serves as a psychological coping mechanism, offering a sense of agency over an uncertain situation.

This study provides empirical evidence on how Russian relocants navigate the legal, economic, and social uncertainties they face in Turkey by creating virtual and physical "bubbles." Social media platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp provide crucial resources, including advice on legal matters, housing, jobs, and education. Physical spaces such as churches, cafés, and bookstores in areas like Kadıköy-Moda have also become central to the formation of these bubbles. These spaces host cultural events, foster political engagements, albeit limited, while offering a temporary space for relocants. The process of fitting into Turkish society remains fluid, as Russian relocants balance their transnational ties with a functional adaptation to their new environment. Russian relocants' experiences in Turkey highlight the fluid and transient nature of their lives in motion, characterized by an unclear future and a turbulent present, where staying and returning are intertwined. These practices sustain their transnational double presence, allowing them to remain actively engaged in the social and professional spheres of both Turkey and Russia.

The political engagement of Russian activists in Turkey warrants deeper exploration, particularly when compared to their activities in European and post-Soviet countries. This contrast provides an opportunity to explore how Turkey's unique political, social, and cultural landscape shapes and transforms the political practices of Russian relocants.

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