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Tysiachniouk, Maria; Konnov, Arsenii

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Relocation from Russia to Georgia: Environmentalists in Exile

By Maria Tysiachniouk and Arsenii Konnov (University of Eastern Finland)

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Abstract

This analytical review is dedicated to Russian civil society in exile in Georgia, an ongoing story of relocation due to internal repressions in Russia, laws affecting NGOs and freedom of speech, the war in Ukraine, and the military draft in Russia. We briefly highlight the whole range of Russian relocants' activities in Georgia, yet focus in depth on environmental activism. Based on our informants' environmental biographies in Russia and in Georgia, we determine and highlight activists' categories, as well as analyzing their motivations and repertoire of collective action.

Historical/Political Context in Russia

The authoritarian trends and pressure on Russian civil society that started in the early 2000s, when Putin came to power, have accelerated dramatically since 2014 (with the annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbas region), and especially in 2022, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These events have become powerful triggers for relocation (many Russians use the term “relocation” instead of “emigration,” as they often do not yet know whether their departure from Russia will be permanent and/or in what country they will settle). In February–March 2022, around 200,000 people left the country, and with the announcement of the military draft in September, a hundred thousand more followed (Stoner 2022, Kuleshova et al. 2022, Zavadskaya 2022, Arkhipova 2022) (see Figure 1).

“Relocants” include political emigrants, Putin regime dissidents, individuals, and NGOs and independent media facing repression. Of these, many have settled in Georgia. On the one hand, the organizational and political environ-

Figure 1: Relocants at the Verhni Lars Crossing Point on the Russian–Georgian Border



Artist: Ivan Sotnikov Jr.—relocated to Georgia; curator: Alexandra Orlova

ment in Georgia is much more liberal than in Russia. On the other hand, adaptation is still a challenge for Russian civil activists due to cultural and language barriers, the mixed reception of Russians in Georgia, and differences in social and political agendas between the two countries.

Research Questions:

How and why have relocated Russians continued to pursue their environmental activism in Georgia?

How is environmental activism situated within the broader spectrum of social activism practiced by Russian relocants?

There are a few publications on how activists attempt to influence Russia's environmental situation from exile (Henry and Plantan 2022). The focus of this analysis is slightly different: we analyze activism not from, but in, exile in Georgia. Findings are based on 20 biographical interviews with environmentalists, conducted in August–October 2022 in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, and two rural settlements in Georgia (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Research Map of Georgia: Research Sites and Border Crossing Points



Designer: Renata Tysiachniuk; curator: Alexandra Orlova

Characteristics of Russian Relocant Community in Georgia

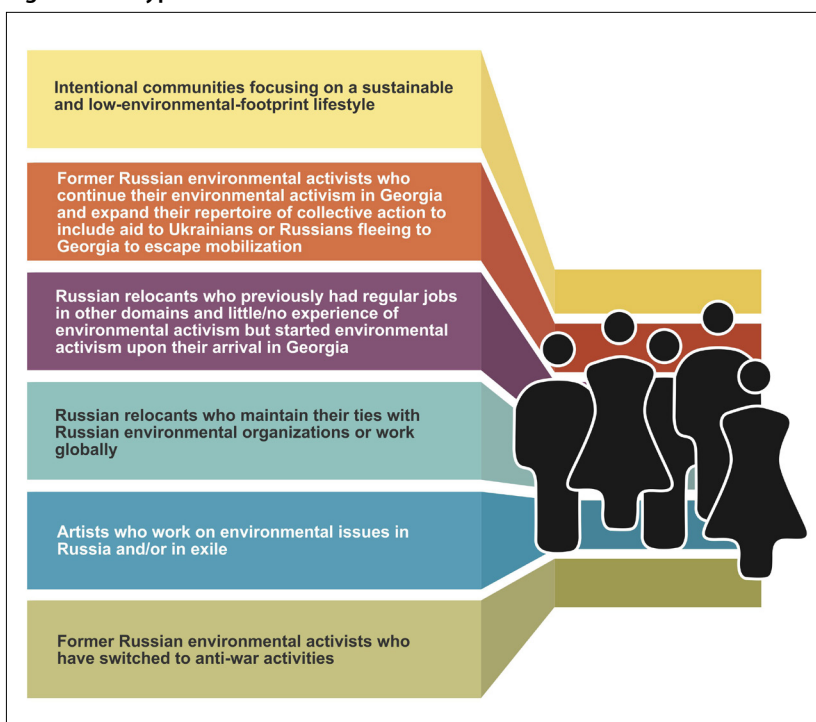
Russian activists have diverse meeting points and local circles (co-living spaces, discussion clubs, expatriate-centric bars, etc.) in Tbilisi, as well as widely known hubs oriented toward political activism (such as Betlemi 23—Emigration for Action) and common events (political rallies and political performances). There are multiple horizontal connections between them. However, as a whole, the relocant community is rather self-centered, with high in-group and low out-group connectivity. Integration is dependent on personal informal connections with Georgians, which are often hard to establish. However, there are some exceptions that involve employing locals in sustainable community-building (Château Chapiteau) or building good relationships with neighbors (Activist Hub). Activists involved in clean-ups and recycling are the most successful at building relationships with Georgian society. They have already managed to establish ties with businesses, including banks (see the discussion of Parki ar Minda and Tbilisi Cleanups below). We identified several categories of relocants (see Figure 3 overleaf).

Types of Environmental Activists in Exile

a) **Intentional communities** focusing on sustainable and low-environmental-footprint lifestyles, which serve as living laboratories for communities in exile, have been founded both before the war (Château Chapiteau, founded in 2021)

and since the war (Activist Hub, founded in May 2022). Château Chapiteau has commercial activity (forest “glamping” and a restaurant in Kakheti region) at its core, but a strong sense of community-building, democratic self-governance, and social and environmental responsibility are explicit parts of its mission. The Château Chapiteau community includes the project team, volunteers, and often guests or shareholders who willingly take part in community life and development. This community positions itself as a driver of local development, employing and supporting local residents. Its environmental agenda includes the preservation of protected wingnut trees on their territory, organizing clean-ups, recycling and upcycling activities, growing a permaculture garden, and providing a locally sourced and mostly vegetarian menu for the team and guests. Château Chapiteau also funds different charity

Figure 3: Types of Environmental Activists in Exile



Designer: Sofia Beloshitskaya; curator: Alexandra Orlova

and anti-war initiatives (such as providing accommodation to Ukrainian refugees free of charge) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Château Chapiteau Intentional Community



Artist: Renata Tysiachniuk; curator: Alexandra Orlova

Activist Hub is a small community situated in the countryside near Tbilisi that occupies two village houses and a small garden plot. It provides a meeting place and temporary accommodation for activists involved in anti-war and envi-

ronmental projects, as well as an opportunity for “grounding” through nature hikes, creative activities, gardening or doing other daily tasks. The community is partly self-funded (the project team is now working, as part of an international anti-war coalition, on a hotline helping young Russians to avoid the military draft) and operates on a non-commercial basis. It follows its own version of voluntary simplicity principles and is active at the neighborhood level, enjoying a friendly attitude from villagers. At the Activist Hub, an eco-friendly lifestyle takes the form of gardening, recycling and composting, swap parties, and a vegan diet (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Activist Hub Intentional Community



Artist: Renata Tysiachniuk; curator: Alexandra Orlova

b) **Former Russian environmental activists** who continue their environmental activism in Georgia and expand their repertoire of collective action to include aid to Ukrainians or Russians fleeing to Georgia to escape mobilization. For example, a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) communication employee has continued working online with Forest Etalon (a temporary substitute for FSC-Russia that was established due to the EU sanctions). She has become actively involved in the “Russians in Batumi” network, which has been raising funds for Ukrainian refugees through charitable concerts and other activities. For example, this respondent helped organize a fair with multiple events that aimed to support Ukrainian kids going to school in Batumi. Environmental actions, such as beach clean-ups, take place occasionally.

The NGO Frame, located in Tbilisi, previously worked in Russia in the field of civic education for teachers, focusing mostly on human rights, but also on environmental education (such as the zero-waste lifestyle). Now, Frame is not only helping Russian emigrants to adapt to their new host country by organizing events and lectures, but also raising funds to support Ukrainian refugees. While environmental activism has not been central to Frame’s activities in Georgia, the ecological agenda is present in their educational events, such as the “Territory of Freedom” summer camp for civil and political activists, where workshops and discussions on “zero waste” were organized.

c) **Russian relocants** who previously had regular jobs in other domains and little/no experience of environmental activism but **started environmental activism upon their arrival in Georgia.**

It is worth noting that the two most prominent environmental initiatives today (at least in terms of the number of people involved) were organized by Russian emigrants who previously did not consider themselves to be environmental activists. Parki Ar Minda (“I don’t want a plastic bag” in Georgian) is a non-profit project that supports the separate collection of waste (operated as an “eco-taxi” service), organizes education events on a wide range of sustainability topics, and conducts team-building eco-activities for corporate partners, especially in the banking sector. This initiative was co-founded by Russian and Georgian partners in 2019 (the Russian co-founder has a background in PR and marketing, not in ecology) and is registered as an NGO.

Tbilisi Clean-Ups, founded in April 2020 by a group of political emigrants from Russia with different backgrounds (IT, marketing, and education), started out as a single local clean-up event whose goal was to establish a community

of environmentally minded activists, as well as to “express gratitude” to Georgia as their new host country. The event brought together over 70 participants and soon became regular. Since then, Parki ar Minda and a number of Georgian environmental activists have partnered with the initiative to organize separate waste collection and promote clean-ups among local residents. The community is active on social media: its Facebook and Instagram accounts, which have several hundred subscribers each, announce their events in Georgian and English, while its Telegram channel, which has over 1,000 subscribers, is mostly in Russian. The community is now expanding its activity beyond Tbilisi (both by organizing clean-ups in other towns or at landmarks and by helping initiative groups outside Tbilisi to organize their own events). The project team has also taken advantage of the skills of its founders to produce a number of IT solutions, such as an interactive map of littered places. The founders of Tbilisi Clean-Ups are in the process of registering the organization as an NGO in order to facilitate communication with private partners and local authorities.

d) **Russian relocants who maintain their ties with Russian environmental organizations** and try to keep up their work, at a global level or in Russia, from abroad. Some of our informants have preserved their ties to activist movements (such as citizen air quality monitoring or zero-waste initiatives) and environmental education programs that still operate in Russia. While staying in touch with their colleagues in Russia, they also play an important role in their social and professional networks, the members of which have relocated or emigrated to different European countries and neighboring countries such as Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. They use their contacts in new places to develop or join new projects, mostly in the field of environmental education, that can be implemented online. Georgia itself offers little room for participation in local projects in the field of sustainability at the moment; this is due to language barriers, the specificity of the local environmental agenda (unlike clean-ups or recycling, such sectors of environmental activism as climate action or air quality sensing are under-represented or absent in the local landscape), and the rather pronounced reluctance of Georgian NGOs to work with Russians.

e) **Artists who work on environmental issues in Russia and/or in exile.**

Our informants, most of whom have moved from Russia relatively recently and therefore have had little time to adapt, are actively establishing new ties within the Russian-speaking community in search of new collaborations, while also trying to connect with the local art scene. Still, due to the same problems of language barriers and divergent attitudes toward Russian emigrants that exist elsewhere, their success in this endeavor is modest. Art projects related to ecology have been particularly vulnerable in the context of war; our informants had to postpone or cancel their working plans after February 24 and relocate in a hurry. They have adapted to this situation by finding different applications for their artistic skills, such as teaching art to kids, working online as designers or illustrators, joining socially oriented projects run by expatriates from other countries, or organizing commercial lectures and workshops. Many of them, however, are planning to move elsewhere: they are currently applying for programs or art residencies outside Georgia.

f) **Former Russian environmental activists who have switched to anti-war activities (shelters, etc.) since relocation.**

For example, one informant-activist was involved in Russia in multiple environmental projects, such as the informal educational initiative Eco-Stream, developing a low-carbon-footprint site in a Russian village, and working on the EU project on Climate Adaptation in local communities of the Russian North. In Georgia, she has been working for a charity foundation that has set up a shelter for Ukrainian refugees, as well as helping provide them with valuable information on how to move to Georgia and later relocate to Europe.

Motivations and Self-Organization Practices among Environmental Activists

Emigration motivated many environmental activists to start new projects that would have been difficult to implement in Russia due to the disempowering socio-political context, repressions against activists (including legal restrictions on NGOs), and smear campaigns against independent civil society. Thus, Château Chapiteau organizes its working processes according to the principles of sociocracy, such as decision-making by consent, shared responsibility for their outcomes, and organization in horizontal “circles.” Tbilisi Clean-Ups has a horizontal structure that encourages its members to propose and implement new ideas, as well as to organize their own events as soon as they get enough experience as volunteers. Environmental activists show interest in each other’s initiatives and support each other by cross-promotion on social media, sharing resources, and attending each other’s events. Such solidarity is pronounced among environmental activists. Many of our informants say that they deliberately adhere to democratic and horizontal self-organization principles in order to oppose the anti-democratic ideology of the current Russian political regime and to serve as an alternative image of Russian society. For them, practices of solidarity and self-organization are a conscious response to war and the authoritarianism of the Russian government. At the same time, being mind-

ful of the political and social complications caused by the influx of Russian citizens into Georgia, activists try not to attract too much attention to themselves, instead showing modesty and respect for their host country. As the founder of Tbilisi Clean-Ups says:

I'm well aware that I don't know the local customs in Georgia. Even if it's merely about eco-activism and clean-ups, it may be considered an intrusion: new people arrive and start doing something that was never done before, disrupting the common way of doing things. In this case, would we be much different from Putin, who invades Ukraine and says that he's going to save people and improve their lives, because it is he who knows better how to do that?

Conclusions

Russian relocants to Georgia represent a wide range of social initiatives, and many of them still have ties to Russian organizations. Within this community, care for the environment is an important value, yet “full-time” environmental activists are few. Many people are making an effort to preserve their eco-friendly lifestyles by joining clean-ups and recycling initiatives, which are still relatively new to Georgia. Others go further, building sustainable, self-governing communities with elements of permaculture and low-carbon lifestyles. Occasionally, environmental activists switch to other types of activism (such as providing help to Ukrainian and Russian refugees), while other immigrants without any background in eco-activism start working on garbage collection and recycling. Leaving Russia was a disruptive and stressful event for most, but it also spurred self-organization and solidarity between those Russian activists who find themselves in a new environment, one that is both challenging (in terms of adaptation and finding new jobs, but also in terms of the tensions caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the simultaneous influx of Russians into Georgia) and empowering (due to Georgia's relatively liberal political environment). The relocants feel thankful to their new host country and see its betterment as an important motive; however, integration into Georgian civil society proves difficult. Nevertheless, environmental activists in exile show good capacity for self-organization: clean-ups involve hundreds of volunteers in Tbilisi and beyond and are used by relocants to establish social ties between themselves. While the long-term outcomes of these activities remain to be seen, the dynamism and mutual support within the community of Russian environmental activists is one of many examples that dispel the widespread myth of Russian civil society's inability to self-organize.

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About the Authors:

Maria Tysiachniouk holds a PhD in Biology from the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a PhD in Sociology from Wageningen University (2012). Through her whole career she studies the environmental movement in Russia and its transformation. She has done extensive research on the role of NGOs in Forest Stewardship and Marine Stewardship Council certification schemes as well as in transnational oil production chains. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 her research is focusing on Russian environmentalists relocated to Georgia, Armenia and Turkey. Maria Tysiachniouk has written more than two hundred fifty publications on topics related to transnational environmental governance, edited several books and has had fieldwork experience in several countries and regions. She is currently a researcher at the University of Eastern Finland.

Arsenii Konnov is an environmentalist and a sociologist. He has graduated from Saint Petersburg State University, Faculty of Biology and Soil Science (2010), and has worked in several NGOs and universities as project manager, Master students tutor, and research assistant. During his career, he studied and taught the subjects of social aspects of sustainable development, urban ecology, sustainable cities and climate adaptation. He is actively involved in environmental sociology research since 2021, and has published several papers on these topics. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he moved to Georgia where he continues his research on Russian environmental activists who relocated abroad after the war started. His research is supported by KONE Foundation and the University of Eastern Finland.

Please see overleaf for References

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html