



War Policies and Migration Aspirations in Russia

Mikael Elinder, Oscar Erixson & Olle Hammar

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has not only triggered a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine but also significant social, economic, and political shifts within Russia. These transformations have shaped the migration aspirations of the Russian population, influencing how many Russians desire to leave the country permanently and where they wish to move. This policy brief presents key findings from *Delmi Report 2024:11 War Policies and Migration Aspirations in Russia*, exploring how the invasion has altered emigration desires and offering insights for policymakers in countries likely to receive Russian migrants.

Background

Russia has long experienced periods of emigration, particularly following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Political instability, economic hardships, and limited freedoms drove many to seek better opportunities abroad. In recent years, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent international sanctions initially led to expectations of increased migration from Russia. However, data suggests that instead of rising emigration, Russian nationalist sentiments surged, and the support for President Vladimir Putin increased.

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought further international sanctions and global condemnation against Russia, with many predicting a significant wave

of emigration from the country. However, our results suggest that migration aspirations in Russia have decreased following the invasion of Ukraine.

Methodology

The analysis is based on data from the Gallup World Poll (GWP), which surveyed over 30,000 individuals in Russia between 2008 and 2023. Key questions addressed migration aspirations, including the percentage of Russians who expressed a desire to move abroad and their preferred destination countries, as well as demographic information and public sentiment regarding political leadership and life satisfaction. The findings allow for an overview of trends in Russian migration aspirations before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

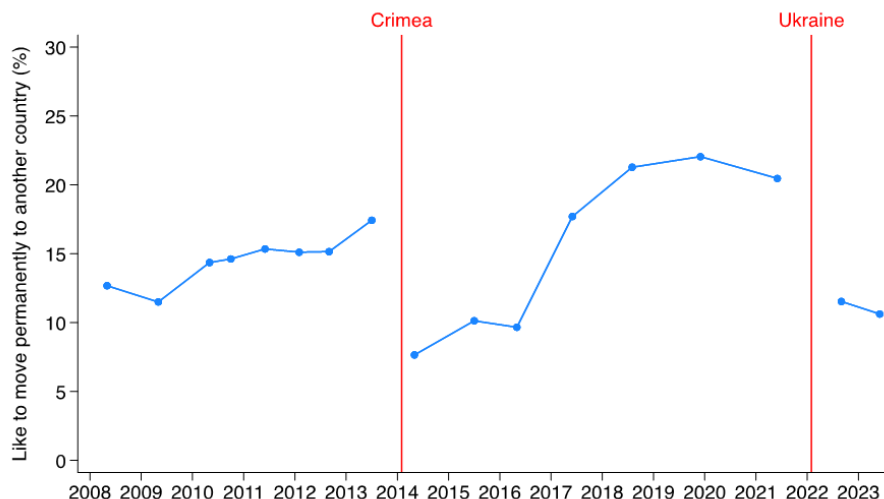
Key Findings

1. **Lower migration aspirations after the invasion:** Contrary to expectations, the share of Russians expressing a desire to move abroad decreased from 20 percent in 2021 to 12 percent after the invasion in 2022 (See Figure 1). While military conflict, economic sanctions, and repression of freedoms would have been expected to increase outward migration, the report shows that after the invasion, more Russians appear to view their country more favorably. This reflects a “rally ‘round the flag” effect similar to the one observed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.
2. **Shift in preferred destination countries:** Historically, Western countries such as Germany, the United States, and Canada were the most popular emigration destinations for Russians. However, after the invasion, China and Turkey, two countries with more support for the Russian policy, have increased in popularity, while preferences for European Union (EU) countries have significantly decreased. The percentage of Russians preferring to move to an EU country dropped from 42 percent before the invasion to 35 percent in 2022–2023.
3. **Surge in nationalism and support for the government:** The invasion led to a surge in support for President Putin and the Russian government, which may have contributed to the decline in migration aspirations. Survey data showed a significant increase in the percentage of Russians approving of their leadership, from 51

percent in 2021 to 76 percent in 2022. This suggests that many citizens have aligned with the government's narrative and view Russia's actions in Ukraine as justified, reducing the desire to leave the country.

4. **Demographic shifts in migration aspirants:** The profile of those expressing a desire to leave Russia remains consistent with global migration trends. Younger, better-educated individuals from larger cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, particularly those with higher incomes, are more likely to want to emigrate. Similarly, those who disapprove of Putin's leadership are also more inclined to want to leave. Overall, however, there has been a decline in migration aspirations across nearly all demographic groups in Russia, following the invasion. This shift is especially present for the males and the younger parts of the population.
5. **Effects of military mobilization:** Contrary to the general invasion effects, the Russian government's announcement of a partial military mobilization in September 2022 did spur increased migration sentiments, especially among young men who were the ones facing the risk of conscription. These mobilization effects, however, only caused a very short-lived spike in migration aspirations.

Figure 1. Migration aspirations 2008–2023



Note: Figure shows the share of the Russian population who would like to move permanently to another country if they had the opportunity, by survey year-month. Data from GWP 2008–2023 (no data from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Red solid lines show the Russian annexation of Crimea in February 2014, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Calculations include GWP sampling weights.
Source: Own calculations based on GWP (2008–2023).

Conclusions

The findings from this report challenge the assumption that military conflict and economic sanctions automatically lead to increased emigration. While there has been some outward movement from Russia, especially among young men at risk of conscription, overall, there has been a sharp decline in migration aspirations. This is likely due to the rallying effect of nationalism, increased support for Putin, and worsening relations between Russia and many Western countries.

The shift in preferred destination countries, particularly towards countries like China and Turkey, highlights the geopolitical realignment of Russia in response to Western sanctions. It also reflects the difficulties many Russians now face in gaining access to EU and United States visas, as well as the growing perception that these regions may be less welcoming to Russian migrants.

Taken together, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine seems to have impacted migration aspirations in Russia. While economic sanctions and repression were expected to trigger large-scale emigration, a combination of rising nationalism, increased support for the government, and external restrictions on migration as well as negative attitudes have likely resulted in the opposite.

While migration aspirations have declined, events such as military escalation or widespread conscription could still trigger increased emigration. Governments should have contingency plans in place to accommodate a sudden influx of Russian migrants, particularly in neighboring countries and regions more likely to receive these migrants.

War Policies and Migration Aspirations in Russia

Mikael Elinder, Oscar Erixson & Olle Hammar

Delmi Policy Brief 2024:11
Stockholm 2024
ISBN 978-91-89701-95-3

The authors are fully responsible for the report's contents including its conclusions and policy recommendations.



SWEDISH GOVERNMENT
INQUIRIES

The Migration
Studies Delegation
Ju 2013:17