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Moral migration and transnationalism: Russian anti-war resistance after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of morality in migration and transnationalism, focussing on the case of Russian anti-war migration and activism against the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Putin's regime. Drawing on moral philosophy and psychology, I argue that Russian departure and activism can be conceptualised as moral migration and transnationalism, defined as "decisions, reasoning, judgements and acts of resistance motivated by obligatory concerns for others' welfare, rights, fairness and justice". Applying this to Russian anti-war activism abroad, the paper underlines how the act of migration can be conceptualised as a form of moral protest, especially for citizens from authoritarian states and autocratic regimes. It also emphasises the role of morality in transnational mobilisation choices and causes activists take up, as well as the moral dilemmas and controversies these present for anti-war communities and movements. By foregrounding the significance of morality, this study seeks to redress its neglect in migration and transnationalism scholarship and underscores the importance of moral theory in the analysis of international politics. Additionally, the paper introduces a new case study of anti-war activism and mobilisation among Russia's emergent anti-war migrant communities in London, Madrid, and Tbilisi, thereby illuminating a critical yet under-researched dimension of the geopolitics of Russian opposition movements.

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Keywords Migration, Transnationalism, Morality, Russian diaspora, Social movements

Introduction

It's about I cannot but do this, it's something inside, one is black and one is white, that is right and that is wrong, if I see injustice I can't close my eyes, I was born this way, this is my way to be first of all, true to myself and I believe in it and I do it[1]

[1] Author interview with Respondent 26, 27 March 2025, Madrid.

Morality has always informed politics. In the decisions and choices individuals, governments and states make, and the actions these motivate. Morality has also stimulated momentous events and movements in history. From anti-colonial struggles, apartheid, the abolition of slavery, and anti-war movements (Davis, 2008; Gandhi, 2009; James, 2001; South African democracy education trust 2017). It continues to play a significant role in our modern times too in assessing the role of technology in warfare, military humanitarian interventions, anti-occupation and secessionist movements and abortion rights (Coady, 2008).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine was another defining moment imbued with moral reckoning. Russians awoke to a new reality; Russia had invaded Ukraine, a neighbouring country where a long and shared history existed, and where numerous individuals held familial and personal connections. Shocked, in disbelief and afraid, Russian activists found themselves impelled to act, and to express their opposition to the war and their government's actions. Many went out to protest, but the streets were full of secret service officers trained in separating people and preventing crowds from forming[2]. Some went out on their own holding big anti-war banners[3], others went out on social media to express their opposition, while others took part in actions and were promptly arrested[4]. Faced with domestic repression and new laws for anyone defaming the "Special Military Operation", many Russians against the war were left with few peaceful channels to express their resistance. For many interviewed the only means of voicing their opposition was to leave and to take up their fight abroad[5] (Hirschman, 1970).

This paper discusses the role of morality in Russian migration and activism against the war and Putin's regime. Drawing on the moral philosophy of Thomas Scanlon and moral theories from psychological studies, I argue that Russian departure and activism can be conceptualised as moral migration and transnationalism defined as "decisions, reasoning, judgements and acts of resistance motivated by obligatory concerns for others' welfare, rights, fairness and justice". Applying this to Russian anti-war activism abroad, the paper underlines how the act of migration can be conceptualised as a form of moral protest, especially for citizens from authoritarian states and autocratic regimes. It also emphasises the role of morality in transnational mobilisation choices activists make, as well as the moral dilemmas and controversies these present for anti-war communities and movements.

While there has been a rich and bountiful literature on diaspora mobilisation motivated by largely nationalist causes, but also rights, development and humanitarianism, few studies have addressed the role of morality directly. Moral theory and its application to migration and transnationalism provides us with a vital optic to understanding how moral reasoning influences identities and political actions, underlining how in times of conflict, war or turbulent times, morality becomes a decision-making process (Kohlberg, 1971), which may lead to anti-nationalist identities and stances and new constructions of the nation abroad.

[2] Author interview with Respondent 32, 29 March 2025, Barcelona.

[3] Author interview with Respondent 25, 21 March 2025, London.

[4] Author interview with Respondent 38, 22 April 2022, Tblisi.

[5] Not all anti-war Russians left Russia or felt unable to voice their opposition. Many activists remain inside and continue to express dissent albeit in limited ways.

This article thus addresses this lacuna in the literature, while simultaneously bringing forth a new case study of anti-war activism and mobilisation by Russia's newly formed anti-war migrant community in London, Madrid and Tblisi. Using 43 qualitative, in depth interviews conducted in these aforementioned cities from Febrauary 2024 to April 2025, I explore how moral migration following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and moral transnationalism evidenced through solidarity with Ukrainians and Helping Russians to leave has been undergirded by a moral reasoning and judgement about how to best address the complex feelings of shame, guilt, concern and sense of responsibility felt by many anti-war Russians.

Russian activists interviewed were selected based on their anti-war mobilisation, and initiatives through personal networks, snowball sampling and direct contact. The sample of respondents included 23 females and 20 males. This corresponded with the findings that female participants were more likely to engage in political activism in exile despite males forming the majority of emigrants (Turchenko et al., 2024). Ages ranged from 24 to 61, though in keeping with official figures most ranged from 20 to 45 years old (Inozemcev, 2023). Half the sample left due to the war but in the UK, due to older migrations most activists had left to pursue post-graduate studies or to work in earlier migration waves since the early 1990s onwards. Respondents were educated professionals, who specialised in marketing, journalism, IT, academia, law, business or in the creative industries.

Interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach whereby analysis occurred during collection (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Using an interpretive inductive method I worked iteratively throughout collection to probe and refine my interviews with participants to deeply explore their motivations for migrating. Later, through analysing their actions, reasoning and feelings in relation to migration, I was able to arrive at a concept of moral migration and transnationalism which connected these categories (Charmaz, 2014).

All the interviews were conducted with the highest ethical research standards, where due to the sensitive nature of the research all participants were informed about the nature of the research, its use and intended output, as well as storage and accessibility. Permission was sought either in writing or verbally before carrying out any interviews and recordings, and anonymity of participants has been used throughout the research collection and writing. To protect the identity of research participants all information related to identity, gender, age etc. have been concealed. The paper proceeds with a review on why people migrate and act transnationally, followed by a discussion about what morality is and how it's defined in this paper. This is followed by an empirical section where moral migration, solidarity with Ukrainians and helping Russians to leave are analysed using the empirical definition proposed. The empirical sections draw on the interview data to demonstrate the feelings, judgements, reasoning and moral motivations of anti-war activists in their decisions to migrate and mobilise transnationally, as well as the choice in which practices and acts to prioritise in their anti-war efforts. It also sheds light on how moral transnationalism posed its own moral dilemmas and contestations for Russia's anti-war community. The paper ends with thoughts on the importance of bringing forth morality as a distinct dimension to understanding political activism and its motivations, as well as its applicability to other cases in international relations.

Why people migrate and mobilise transnationally

Why people migrate and the drivers of migration have been the subject of much debate in migration studies. Early theories tried to capture the multi-faceted factors that motivate migration by underlining the economic rationale of migration decisions or the role of states and corporations in shaping migration (Massey et al., 1993). The early functionalist theories, which comprise the neo-classical migration theories, push-pull models and the New Economics of Labour Migration stressed that migration decisions were made on a rational cost-benefit analysis where higher wage differentials from one country to another motivated migration decisions (Todaro, 1969). Meanwhile, the historical-structural theories instead underlined the role of business and states in shaping migration decisions where immigration is shaped by the interests and demands of wealthy groups, and industrial societies (Massey et al., 1993).

While underlining structural factors, these theories lack a key dimension related to human agency. Migration is a decision that ultimately involves human beings and their lives, a decision which is contextual, relational and subjective. Social theories have come closer to capturing some of these dynamics by revealing the transnational lives of migrants and their families (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Others have emphasized the importance of migration networks and systems which create channels of information and resources between sending and receiving states, setting in motion specific patterns of migration (Gurak and Caces 1992).

Yet still, while demonstrating the importance of transnationalism and networks of knowledge exchange for setting in motion migration routes, social theories have not gone far enough to elucidate the base motivations of why people leave. Afterall, around 96% of the world's population don't leave, so how can we better conceptualize migration motivations?

It is here that Hein de Hass offers a more grounded understanding of migration that takes into full account human agency. For de Hass, migration must be understood as a "social process that cannot be seen in isolation from the broader processes of change of which it is a constituent part."(de Haas, 2021, p. 12). As such, he argues that we must understand migration as motivated by aspirations and capabilities, a framework that encapsulates human ambitions with their contextual capabilities. The framework proposed emphasises the variation in migration decisions, which are underpinned by cultural perceptions, intrinsic desires, abilities and opportunities, as well as providing a much more convincing theory for immobility, in which many other theories cannot explain. De Hass therefore provides a much more compelling and subjective case for why people leave, how they choose where they want to go, as well as why people stay. It brings a welcome and crucial shift in our understanding of migrant decisions, which not only humanises migrants and migration but also captures more accurately real-life determinants of migration.

Building on de Hass's important work on human agency, I want to propose another dimension to the aspirations and capabilities framework, related to morality, which has, as yet not been addressed by the migration literature more widely. Migration decisions are not always related to aspirations to migrate for a better life but can also be a decision based around the moral implications of staying. For migrants from autocratic or oppressive regimes, migration decisions are also informed by issues of rights, justice and welfare for fellow nationals or foreign populations. Migration from authoritarian states

thus takes on another component, it becomes a political act and as I argue here can be a form of moral protest.

The literature on diasporic transnationalism has paid scant attention to moral dimensions of diaspora's motivations and decisions to mobilise. Diaspora have often been labelled long-distance nationalists (Anderson, 1992) motivated to act due to their nationalist and emotive zeal strengthened by their distance from their countries of origin (Lyons & Mandaville, 2012). They may be far physically but they share in a collective and imagined identity and see themselves as part of the nation (Shain and Barth 2003), which can be mobilized and constructed to pursue national claims. Diaspora's national allegiances and loyalties have motivated a plethora of diaspora roles in pursuit of rights (Baser and Swain 2010), recognition (Sökefeld, 2008), or secession (Koinova, 2011), and have been involved in key roles as state-builders (Kadhum, 2025), development agents (Faist, 2008) diplomatic ambassadors (Kennedy, 2022), and much else besides (Kadhum, 2020).

At other times diaspora maybe be motivated by more normative ideals. They may act to spread democratic or liberal norms (Antwi-Boateng, 2012) helping their fellow countrymen through practices of democracy and the remittance of certain values (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). This can also translate to other domains in the service of transitional justice (Karabegović, 2018) or peacebuilding (Abdile, 2014) in post-conflict societies.

Furthermore, diaspora may be motivated by humanitarian values to support disenfranchised communities, or to support livelihoods. They may also act in ad-hoc ways in response to political events, conflict and wars, or natural disasters, such as earthquakes, or effects of climate change. Diaspora may send remittances, volunteer, or act as brokers of information between host countries and affected areas (Bostrom et al., 2016).

Less discussed in the literature are motivations founded on moral reasoning where diaspora take a moral stand against governments, states or their policies, and at times even take an anti-nationalist position. Certainly, some diaspora scholars have addressed diasporic activism and movements against authoritarian regimes (Moss, 2021; Quinsaat, 2024; Simpson, 2012), yet there is little work on the role of diaspora or migrants in resisting homeland foreign policies especially in relation to homeland imperial interventions and war against other countries. War and conflict present diaspora with not only an opportunity to be peace wreckers, peacebuilders or both (Smith & Stares, 2007), but also to take a moral stand for the war or against it. The 2003 Iraq war for instance mobilised segments of the Iraqi diaspora against the war. Many took part in the global anti-war demonstrations in February 2003, while others lobbied the coalition against intervention (Kadhum, 2025). However, Iraqi diasporic anti-war stances were against military intervention by the US-UK coalition and not the homeland government.

The case of the Russian anti-war migrant community offers interesting and valuable empirical and theoretical insights to migration and diaspora studies. Firstly, in this case the diaspora is acting against the foreign policy not of the host state but that of the home state. Mobilisation is driven by a desire to stop Russia's military aggression towards Ukraine, to end the war and to oppose Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime. As such, conflict-generated diaspora are not only those physically affected by the war as much of the literature has underlined (Lyons, 2006), but can also be those from the aggressor state morally opposed to it.

Unable to mobilise freely inside the country due to persecution of anti-war messaging and activism, many have fled in protest and have in the process of migrating become politicized and mobilized transnationally from abroad. Their acts, practices and stances against the war and Putin's regime are motivated by moral reasoning, which has shaped their migration decisions and political transnationalism. As such, categories of voluntary and involuntary migration are expanded by this case study where voluntary and involuntary mobility are not only structural constraints but constraints of personal value systems and beliefs. Many left comfortable lives, family and jobs and had no intention of leaving a vibrant life in Russia. As one respondent declared, "even after the war started, I didn't intend to leave because I was very connected with Russia, I had a very good financial position, I was very satisfied with my profession in Russia"[6]. Thus, their moral convictions influenced their migration and transnationalism. Yet, how do we define morality? And how can we empirically investigate its effects on migration and transnationalism?

Defining morality and moral migration and transnationalism

Morality is a concept that is widely contested in both philosophy and psychology, with various interpretations and approaches. In the philosophical tradition, several theories have shaped our thinking on morality. The utilitarian approach stressed by Jeremy Bentham and later John Stuart Mills emphasized the principle of utility. John Bentham argued that "we should act always so as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number" (Burns et al., 2008). Thus, given a scenario where a specific action will lead to some people suffering but a majority prosper, the utilitarian approach would argue that the majority who benefit justifies the action. The focus of utilitarianism is on consequences, and the aggregate utility that an action produces. Consequently, there are circumstances when moral decisions will produce harm if they serve the greater good.

Immanuel Kant's deontological moral theory on the other hand underlines the role of duty (Kant, 2012). His focus is on the intentionality of actions and whether they would be in principle consented to by those involved. If for instance an agreement was made by person A and person B while person A knew that they were unable to keep the terms of the agreement, then would person B have consented to the agreement? For Kant, the actions of Person A are morally wrong, no matter what the circumstances. In contrast to a utilitarian approach, for Kant there are universal unbreakable principles, actions which one should never do irrespective of the situation.

While both moral theories offer key insights into ways of judging right and wrong actions, they are too broad to capture narrower instances of moral concern related to our duty to others and our requirements to help them. Here, T.M Scanlon's work is illuminating. Scanlon's moral theory, which he names as 'what we owe to each other', speaks directly to this domain of morality (Scanlon, 2000). He states,

> *What I have presented is thus most plausibly seen as an account not of morality in this broad sense in which most people understand it, but rather of a narrower domain of morality having to do with our duties to other people, including such things as requirements to aid them, and prohibitions against harming, killing, coercion, and deception. (Scanlon, 2000, p. 6).*

[6] Author interview with Respondent 6, 26 February 2024, London.

Using social contract theory to formulate his arguments, he underlines that there is a contractual agreement between persons in the moral domain, which means that when we make moral decisions, we must be able to justify them to others. As such, moral judgements are not metaphysical, but are rooted in reason, and more specifically the adequacy of reasons for prioritizing some things over others and the actions they inspire. So when we make moral judgments we are essentially asking why we *do* certain things. We are asking about the motivations behind the action or beliefs and how this relates to other people.

Scanlon argues that "thinking about right and wrong is, at the most basic level, thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject"(Scanlon, 2000, p. 5). In other words, put in a similar position, would we be able to reasonably reject a specific course of action? This is particularly relevant to my argument as Russian diaspora motivations for migrating and transnationalism drew on a 'what we owe to each other' morality that reasoned that migrating from Russia is the best way to protest the war against Ukraine, stand with Ukrainians, and to support fellow anti-war Russians inside and outside the country.

However, while Scanlon's philosophical definition is illuminating and helps us navigate a specific moral terrain, it does not provide us with a definition that allows us to define morality so that we can empirically investigate its influence on migration decisions and transnationalism. In order to do so, I borrow from the field of psychology a definition which is in keeping with Scanlon's moral theory yet offers an amenable definition for assessing the responses of interviewed participants.

Audun Dahl has argued that though many psychologists have given up on trying to define morality due to the many approaches that exist, we need a working definition to help us gain clarity on the type of morality we are talking about and to delineate between different definitions (Dahl, 2023). He discusses four common approaches to morality including linguistic – how people use the word morality, functionalist – which focusses on the consequences and functions of morality, evaluating – which seeks to capture the good qualities of morality, and normative – which tries to account for all the normative judgments about rights, wrongs, bad and good morality. Yet each has its flaws, with the linguistic being used to describe many situations by individuals, the functionalist is hard to evaluate without knowing what the consequences are, the evaluating lacked a description for empirical method and the normative needed to be more specific about the types of normative considerations it was addressing. In attempting to address the shortcomings of each, Dahl develops a definition that is rooted in obligatory concerns with how to treat others, but is also substantive, focusing on welfare, rights, fairness and justice. His definition of morality is:

> *obligatory concerns with how to treat other sentient beings (welfare, fairness, rights, and justice), as well as reasoning, judgments, emotions, and actions that spring from those concerns (Dahl, 2023, p. 63).*

This empirical definition of morality underlines the morality of "what we owe to one another" by stressing issues of welfare, fairness, rights and justice but it links these to the emotions that this inspires and the actions that may stem from such emotions. It therefore underlines morality as a type of decision-making process (Kohlberg, 1971). It also allows us to see how morality has shaped identities and thus decisions and actions.

As Elliot Turiel has argued "Insofar as people's identities are determined by morality, they are motivated to act in accord with their moral judgments" (Turiel, 2022, p. 13). It is therefore a fitting definition for exploring the claim of this paper, that morality has played a part in migration decisions and transnationalism.

Furthermore, the definition above also provides us a with a technical definition, which coincides with some, not all everyday uses of the word morality. It allows us to explore how moral development also constitutes issues of resistance and subversion, which are integral to change (Turiel, 2003). It is also descriptive, in that it captures people's evaluative judgments of what is fair, just etc. not ones defined by the researcher. As such, Dahl's definition is also culturally relative, as what is considered fair, right and just in one context may in fact be understood differently in another. All people wherever their contexts are not indifferent to authority, or concerns for others. It allows thus an exploration of how individuals judge what counts as issues of welfare, fairness, rights and justice, and the emotions these carry and the actions these inspire.

Drawing on the philosophical and psychological studies mentioned above we can now define moral migration and transnationalism as "decisions, reasoning, judgements and acts of resistance motivated by obligatory concerns for others' welfare, rights, fairness and justice". In the next section, I will use this definition to guide my analysis of the Russian anti-war diaspora's migration and transnationalism underlining how morality has shaped their decisions and acts of resistance.

Russia's anti-war migration, morality and transnational resistance

The war against Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a large migration from Russia as people grappled with the consequences of Putin's aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine. Many travelled to the borders of Russia to try and cross by land to neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Georgia while others used these countries as transit destinations to make their onward journeys to Baltic States, Western Europe, Turkey, Dubai, the United States and beyond.

According to some estimates up to 1.3 million Russians have left since the war against Ukraine in 2022 (Kiseleva and Safronova 2023). Russians have largely left in two migration waves, the first in the Spring and Summer of 2022, and later in September 2022 after the partial mobilisation call was made (Krawatzek and Sasse 2024). Yet while some Russians subsequently returned, and others practiced a form of circular migration, many hundreds of thousands of Russians remain abroad.

The demographics of those who have left are varied, with the majority being under 45 years of age (Inozemcev, 2023). Many are educated or skilled workers in sectors that range from IT, Marketing, Art, Journalism, and Trade, while others have come as masters and PhD students. The choice of migration destination is often linked to the profiles of migrants, with those who are less educated heading to Central Asia, while Armenia, and Georgia tend to have a younger, educated and more urban crowd, with large populations of political activists (Krawatzek and Sasse 2024). Persecuted individuals who've fled, have sought humanitarian visas in countries including Germany, France, Spain and even as far away as Argentina. Meanwhile due to the high cost of emigrating to the UK, the socio-economic profiles of Russians in the UK differs from those who have emigrated to Germany, France, and Spain or neighbouring countries. Those who've migrated to the United Kingdom after the full-scale invasion are largely affluent individuals and families,

professionals, or students who have come to pursue their graduate studies. Many have migrated using the UK's Global Talent Visa or have come as students, with a rare few who have sought and claimed asylum status.

Motivations for leaving Russia are complex and varied, with many Russians leaving out of concern for their economic welfare, the curtailment of civil liberties, persecution and fear of mobilisation. Migration decision-making has thus been influenced by a range of factors linked to the changing domestic and geopolitical landscape that Russians now finds themselves in. What is interesting about the 2022 migration wave and what differentiates it from previous migrations, which were largely economically motivated, is that thousands of Russians who left held anti-war views and many thousands were activists or those who protested the war in Russia. Thus, what marks this migration wave as different is that for many who left, moral considerations have also formed part of their decision-making process in keeping with Kohlberg's assessment (1971). Many interviewees stated that they had no desire to leave Russia because they had good lives and good jobs but due to the war and the repression they chose to leave as a form of protest or an act of resistance. A few excerpts from two activists demonstrates this point underlining how their rights to freedom of speech and protest against the war would be curbed if they stayed in Russia, which prompted their act of moral migration and activism.

Respondent 23[7]: The reason is connected with the war. Because of the freedom of speech, what I told you before, it's connected with you can't say anything against the war. For me, it's absolutely impossible to be silent about it. When the war started, people in Russia who were against the war started to speak. It was dangerous and it became danger every day and it was directly connected to the war.

Respondent 28[8]: It was like 6 March 2022; the only reason was war. When the war started there was a meeting in Moscow, I was living there, there was a meeting on the first day, this meeting was the first in my life. I was never an activist…

While some activists were politically active before the war, others were not, but the war politicised them and altered their judgements and feelings about their country of birth and compelled them to leave and act in ways they hadn't expected, or necessarily desired. Faced with a new reality, migrating became a way to protest, process and act on their moral feelings related to the war against Ukraine, underlining their obligatory concern for others' welfare and rights. Respondent 36[9] captures the sense of injustice felt at the time and the concern for the welfare of Ukraine which motivated their actions,

"It was really scary to leave it because I didn't visit Georgia before, I didn't leave Russia before for long. So I visited Egypt in the past and that's it. Egypt and Belarus. So it was a very big step to do it.

Author: Why did you do it?

It was a major reason, I guess, because I couldn't stay there and see what was going on around me. I wanted to do something to stop it or to help Ukraine but it was really difficult because you could do it, you could go to a protest or something, but you'd be imprisoned and it's not a good scenario."

While internal politics and external action may at first appear separate, for the anti-war community both are deeply intertwined. Due to the repression of rights in Russia,

[7] Author interview with Respondent 23, 17 December 2024, online Zoom call.

[8] Author interview with Respondent 28, 28 March 2025, Madrid.

[9] Author interview with Respondent 36, 20 April 2025, Tblisi.

many felt compelled to voice their opposition *through* leaving and not merely after exit as Hirschman stresses (Hirschman, 1970). Moral migration also instigated a moral transnationalism underlining how the migration process, and an exilic condition can inspire moral actions. Respondent 8 captures this dynamic,

> *I am going to leave in order to do good stuff outside of the country because basically people were like at the crossroads of like either I continue living in Russia and try to do this thing that I've been doing, and morally I have to get involved in anti -war activism because that's part of my like values and then I will go to prison, or I leave and continue*[10]

Additionally, as war creates opposition and opposition induces more repressive measures from the state, activists recognised the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, leaving Russia was a decision made around the judgement that the only way they could help their fellow countrymen was to do it from abroad.

As Respondent 7 explains,

> *and what distinguishes us, importantly, from the communities which identify themselves with Ukraine is that for us, repressions in Russia are also important. And we see those things as inevitably linked, and we see one as an important, decisive condition of the other. So internal aggression is enabling conditions for external aggression. So that's why for us it is important that these things are linked*[11].

The morality underlined by Russian migration also has a gendered dimension as for the men who chose to leave there was the added risk of being called to serve on the front lines. While the fear can be understood as not wanting to die on the battleground, it was also a fear of harming others. Many Russians have Ukrainian relatives, friends in Ukraine or have Ukrainian ancestry due to the shared history of the Soviet Union. Thus, the idea of fighting and killing Ukrainians also motivated their decision to leave to avoid conscription. As one migrant described to the BBC, "I am a pacifist and was terrified of being sent to kill other people. I've been against Russia's policy towards Ukraine since 2014. Invasion and killing of civilians is unacceptable,"

The emphasis on the welfare of others, of not wanting to harm Ukrainians, motivated the migration of thousands of men in Russia. Indeed, one of the organisations helping Russians to escape the draft confirmed how many of the men who approached them were those who explicitly refused to kill Ukrainians[12]. This moral judgement emphasises Scanlon's moral philosophy of 'what we owe one another' where courses of action are justified on the basis of not being rejected by someone else if they were put in a similar position.

Thus, while migration from Russia cannot be extricated from its politics of repression, and fears around mobilisation, underlying these motives and reasoning is a morality about rights, the welfare of others, and issues of justice (Dahl, 2023). In other words, decisions to migrate were not simply political, about what people *can* or *should* do, but also undergirded by moral contractual considerations of what we owe to one another.

[10] Author interview with Respondent 8, 5 March 2024, London.

[11] Author interview with Respondent 7, 4 March 2024, London.

[12] Author interview with Respondent 17, 23 May 2024, online Zoom call.

While resisting authoritarianism, oppression and the war have been important factors in why anti-war Russians have left the country, it is important to underscore that moral migration remains largely a privilege of the few who are able to physically leave, and those who have resources and networks that allow them to do so. As much of the migration research has underlined, the poorest in society are not those who make up the largest profile of migrants, but rather it is predominantly those who have the capabilities, networks and resources to facilitate their migration (Haas, Castles, and Miller 2022). As one activist explained,

Respondent 5[13]: I think this is a very privileged view. I mean, not by you, but if people do this because as a form of protest, it means that they can afford to do this. Because well, I mean, yeah, so it must be, for example, again, if it's upper middle class and they know some language well, they have some qualifications that would still be considered valid in other countries, aka if you can afford this, then yeah, obviously, I think if more people could afford it, more people would immigrate.

The response from Respondent 5 is notable. Moral migration is certainly linked to material capabilities, as not everyone with a desire to migrate can do so. However, while some Russian anti-war migrants eventually returned due to economic or personal hardships in their chosen destinations (The Bell, 2025), their initial migrations are still testament to the impetus of morality in shaping their actions.

Solidarity with Ukrainians

The moral considerations which informed leaving Russia have also played a part in the political transnationalism of anti-war Russians. Many were politically active prior to the 2022 war and participated in the Bolotnaya protests in Russia in 2011 against Putin and his United Russia party and in 2015 in honour of the murdered opposition politician, Boris Nemtsov. Yet for others, it was the war that politicised them, altering their sense of who they were, their identities and their positionality as citizens of an aggressor state. This propelled a transnational mobilisation towards helping Ukraine and Ukrainians, underlined by a moral responsibility captured in this exchange with Respondent 18[14],

> *Respondent 18: So I was born in Kazakhstan, my parents are Russian, they moved to Kazakhstan while they were in their lifetime. And at 8 years old we moved back to Russia, and since then I basically finished school, finished university there, and right after I finished the bachelor's I went to London. And basically since I was a teenager, I was watching content in English language and whatnot, so, when I went to summer camps and people were just singing Russian songs on guitars, I didn't really join them because I didn't listen to a lot of Russian music and I didn't really, I don't know, I guess I didn't have a strong connection in my head with a lot of Russian music. So, I was kind of imagining myself living abroad somewhere, which used to happen, and yeah, I feel like fast forward to the full-scale war, I feel like what made me feel more Russian than I was before is the necessity to take responsibility for it…". Author: That's really interesting what you said earlier about your Russianness coming out after the war….*

[13] Author interview with Respondent 5, 20 February 2024, London.

[14] Author interview with Respondent 18, 30 May 2024, London.

Respondent 18: I don't know if I can be elaborate on this much more but when a big injustice like this happens, and it's the country and it's kind of my country is doing that. I cannot allow to take any distance from it anymore.

Interestingly, what strengthened the Russian identity of Respondent 18 was not Russian nationalism but their responsibility as a Russian citizen of an aggressor state. Their moral stance underlined by a welfare and concern for others thus strengthened their Russian identity through a sense of a contractual obligation and a morality of Scanlon's what we owe to one another philosophy. As a result of the obligatory concerns and sense of personal responsibility that Respondent 18 felt towards the injustice committed by their country, they were inspired to act towards helping with evacuating Ukrainians from Ukraine with an initiative that was created immediately after the war between Russians and Ukrainians. A 24/7 help line for Ukrainians was set up where Ukrainians inside the country could write and request to be evacuated and the organisation would respond by working with people on the ground and transnationally to move them to safer areas. As the operation expanded, the organisation also worked in the occupied areas to evacuate people there, or at other times providing humanitarian and medical aid.

Other Russian anti-war diaspora individuals also contributed to Ukraine's war effort by providing medical equipment to the Ukrainian army. Through Ukrainian networks and organisations and a German supplier of high-grade medical equipment, Respondent 16 was able to fundraise GBP millions of pounds to service Stop Stabilisation Centres, medical centres for emergency procedures in the absence of hospitals. Funds were raised through charitable dinners where Russian and Ukrainian guests would each pay GBP 10,000, which would immediately go towards paying for the medical supplies.

In Russia, it is considered treason and a criminal offence to aid Ukrainians, thus many of the diaspora helping Russians inside the country are at risk of getting arrested should they ever return to Russia. Many organisations are considered foreign agents, or undesirable organisations, categories designated by the Russian State, which signify repercussions for anyone Russian collaborating with them and extended prison sentences.

Yet despite these risks and real threats, the decision to help save Ukrainian lives emphasises the moral reasoning and judgements underlining their actions where their concern is for the welfare of those being attacked and not for their co-nationals doing the attacking. When asked what motivated Respondent 15[15], who also supported Respondent 16's[16] dinners, they state, "tremendous guilt, the desire for Putin to fail (unrealistic), support the side that was brutally attacked, just basic humanity". Thus, issues of justice, fairness, and welfare underlined by emotions of guilt and a sense of concern for the injured party underline this need to resist Putin and help humanity through a moral transnationalism.

In the UK context, solidarity with Ukraine manifested through Russian and Ukrainian organisations and volunteer groups, donating toys, clothes, food, and providing advice and mentoring[17]. At times, it also meant housing Ukrainians as several diaspora individuals have done through the UK's 'Homes for Ukrainians' scheme where a UK family who has space in their home can volunteer to house Ukrainian refugees.

[15] Author interview with Respondent 15, 29 April 2024, London.

[16] Author interview with Respondent 16, 10 May 2024, London.

[17] Google Doc of UK and London initiatives shared with author in November 2022.

Respondent 21 was one such individual who volunteered to match UK households with Ukrainians seeking refuge in the UK. Working with UK Welcomes Ukraine, a volunteer organisation matching sponsors with refugees, building a database for connecting people, organising video calls between sponsors and families, translating for Ukrainian families, writing visa applications and helping with integration.

Many anti-war Russians interviewed helping Ukrainians did so at great personal cost. Not only did they fear their own safety but also the safety of their families back home. It also meant that most were unable to return to Russia to see relatives but were compelled to visit them outside of Russia expanding their transnational lives to multiple nodes. Yet despite the fear, many carried on with their work. Motivating their work was an obligatory concern for the welfare of vulnerable others, and an impassioned desire to help those in need that outweighed the risk to their safety and family's safety in Russia.

> *Respondent 21*[18]*: I am afraid. I'm afraid because I don't want to go back because I think that I'm like a perfect exchange material with my X citizenship especially. And I know that they've imprisoned a woman who donated something like $50 […] I'm also a bit worried about my relatives there right because you know it's not hard to find out who is who but at the same time you know if we're all so afraid then you know then nothing will ever happen.*

The above excerpt demonstrates a moral reasoning has taken place for Respondent 21, where after weighing up the risks of their actions and fear, they continued with their work to effect change. The transnationalism of helping Ukrainians amongst many anti-war Russians therefore cannot be understood as long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992), but one inspired by a concern for justice and welfare that extends beyond state boundaries and national imaginations.

At times the morality of helping Ukrainians has also posed ethical challenges for many activists. This has often led to moral dilemmas and heated debates within the Russian anti-war migrant community both online and physically. For instance, many antiwar migrants view their moral obligations as primarily helping Ukrainians versus fellow Russians inside the country, while others see this as a betrayal of their fellow Russian citizens who are suffering alone. Others meanwhile draw the line at helping Ukrainian refugees, while others still are more than happy to provide support for the Ukrainian army. The divergent moral positions, however, mean that not all Russian activists see themselves as 'inside the people', to quote Shain and Barth's depiction of national unity (2003), but indeed for many it is about acting against them. The following exchange with Respondent 35 [19] captures these moral stances and dilemmas:

> *Respondent 35: There is a huge disagreement between activists in Russia should we help Ukrainian army, should we only help civilians? Back then when I went to anti-war forum this is too much to help Ukrainian army I thought, it's not fine with me ethically, but then I started thinking about it a lot and the second forum I was being part of it, because in the end this is ethically normal, I'm fine with this. I had disagreements with some of my friends, I lost my friend from school, she lives in Russia, once she wrote me on Instagram I don't want to talk with you anymore, its equal to*

[18] Author interview with Respondent 21, 19 November 2024, online Zoom call.

[19] Author interview with Respondent35, 21 April 2025, Tblisi.

helping army with the guns. But when the war changed that the Ukrainian army went to Kursk, and Belgorod region, then I was confused again, because this is hard to process at first and then I thought okay it's not ethically okay with me I don't argue with people who do this, if its guns it's not fine if helping things, medical aids and evacuation cars, it was okay in 2022/23 and 2024 beyond it wasn't okay.
Author: What changed for you?
Respondent 35: When Ukrainian army started going in Russian part.

The above exchange demonstrates one example of the myriad moral transnational identities, positions and practices that exist in relation to the war and anti-Putin sentiment within the Russian migrant community. The morality underlining some transnational practices and stances in relation to helping Ukraine within the anti-war migrant community are deeply contested and controversial and have created rifts within certain activist and opposition groups. For some helping Ukraine means defeating Putin, for others, it means saving Ukrainian lives and helping Ukrainians resist. However, some activists acknowledged that in helping the Ukrainian army, they could not really claim to be anti-war since they were trying to empower one of the warring factions. Nonetheless, for some activists, resisting Russia's imperial ambition, and helping the side that is occupied posed no moral dilemmas[20]. Yet while some are resolute in their moral convictions, others have opted to work towards less morally contentious causes. As a result, many have instead opted to help their fellow Russian citizens inside the country or helping those who are drafted or want to desert to leave in safety underlining a morality no less concerned with the rights and welfare of others. To this I now turn.

Helping Russians to leave

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been much debate amongst those who have left about the moral implications of staying in Russia. Many in the diaspora have been critical of those who have stayed behind arguing that in doing so they are supporting Putin's regime. Though it is impossible to evacuate all anti-war Russians from Russia, many activists understand migration and helping Russians to leave as an act of resistance because it means opposing the war, helping and standing in solidarity with Ukrainians and fellow anti-war Russians inside Russia, whilst simultaneously undermining Russia's war against Ukraine through brain drain (Inozemcev, 2023). This has led to a moral transnationalism underscored by a concern for rights and welfare for vulnerable communities inside and outside Russia. Consequently, a plethora of organisations have been established in the diaspora working to help different categories of Russians to leave; those fleeing political persecution, those who wish to avoid mobilisation, and those who are helping deserters to find a safe passage out of the country.

Working through a wide and intricate web of transnational networks and organisations globally, anti-war Russians have mobilised effectively to create communications with individuals on the inside seeking to leave. Through collaborative efforts between activists in the West and neighbouring countries, organisations and small initiatives have worked to inform Russians about asylum and humanitarian visas, provide underground shelters, write visa applications, provide financial assistance, and even at times provide fake passports to allow Russians to avoid conscription.

[20] Author interview with Respondent 36, 21 April 2025, Tblisi.

Indeed, one prominent organisation interviewed stated that their primary goal was to "sabotage the mobilisation"[21] a means of protecting the lives of Russian soldiers and their individual rights to refuse participation in the war. The organisation has received 25,000 appeals largely from Moscow and St Petersburg, but also Russians in the Far East and National Republics. It has provided legal advice and consulting to those who want to escape mobilisation, psychological help to those inside as well as helped others to escape through hideouts and shelters.

Another organisation has been at the forefront of helping politically persecuted people to flee. Through crowdfunding on social media, and trust networks inside Russia and neighbouring countries, and anonymous social media platforms the organisation has been a first port of call for many persecuted anti-war activists, independent journalists and LGBTQ Russians facing a criminal case against them in Russia for minor offences such as defaming the Russian army on social media. After a rigorous verifications process, the organisation then works with a transnational coalition of human rights organisations, and lawyers to create safe passages, provide shelters, and humanitarian visas to individuals so that they can flee in safety. So far, the organisation has consulted thousands of Russians and helped evacuate over 180 individuals from Russia. Asked why the founder was motivated to mobilise in such risky circumstances, they stated,

> *Respondent 32*[22]*: A feeling of resistance. I mean, we did the same in Russia. So we went to the rally, we knew that nothing could happen after, but it was about community, it was about like, you can say no to new law or to government, to anyone. For me it's really important to try to find some new instruments, how to resist authoritarian country, because for now I work not only with Russia, for now I work with Berlin NGO, and I coordinated a program to help people, LGBTQ plus human rights defenders in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. And I see the same framework, the same law, the same instruments…[…]…*

The morality of concern for others thus extends beyond Russia to helping other populations facing similar circumstances and oppression. It is a morality not bounded by nation but one that is universal in its application, that draws on resistance as a means to subvert the status quo, and eventually lead to change (Turiel, 2003).

Concluding remarks

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Russians have left the country. Many departed due to persecution, fear of mobilisation and their anti-war convictions. While their migrations were shaped by a variety of factors, an exploration into their judgements, and emotions reveals that moral reasoning also formed part of their decision-making process. The concept of moral migration and transnationalism proposed in this paper, along with its methodological and empirical application, offers a valuable framework for assessing the moral dimensions of resistance – dimensions that might otherwise remain hidden if viewed solely through a political lens. As demonstrated, morality is not only a motivating factor in migrants' decision to leave but also influences their political actions after migration. Moral theory thus provides a crucial lens from which to analyse the sociology of migration and transnationalism, enabling

[21] Author interview with Respondent 17, 9 May 2024, online Zoom call.

[22] Author interview with Respondent 32, 29 March 2025, Barcelona.

a deeper understanding of contextual reasoning, judgements, emotions and the actions they inspire. This perspective is particularly pertinent for analysing international resistance or solidarity movements more broadly, as well as right wing movements where a moral concern for humanity is replaced with an exclusive concern for particular communities.

Different from previous migrations from Russia, which were largely economic in nature, the migration and transnationalism of Russian migrants from February 2022 has been shaped by anti-war sentiments, and anti-Putin resistance. Some activists were politicised before the war, while others became politicised in the process of migration, leading to their activism abroad and moral transnational acts of resistance.

Beyond personal aspirations, the activists, and migrants interviewed consistently emphasised the centrality of justice, and a concern for the welfare of others in shaping their migration decisions, transnational practices, and political actions. Feelings of shame or guilt regarding their country's military aggression prompted many to assume personal responsibility and to engage in actions opposing the war and Putin's regime. However, the moral foundations of their activism also gave rise to complex dilemmas, as individuals navigated how best to respond, and as moral boundaries became subjects of debate and tension within activist circles, among friends and the broader Russian anti-war community. While de Haas' framework highlights aspirations and much of the diaspora literature foregrounds nationalism, the experiences of Russian anti-war migrants underlines the role of morality in migration decision-making and transnational activism.

In times of conflict, wars and imperial interventions, morality emerges as an important facet to understanding transnational practices. It not only illuminates the motivations of non-state actors towards their homelands, but also the domestic political dynamics that motivate such actions, and significantly the fault lines within movements. As demonstrated by the Russian anti-war community, moral migration and transnational practices, stances and actions are widely debated and contested among different opposition groups and activists. These actors often hold divergent views on how best to serve the antiwar effort, reflecting the complexity and heterogeneity of the movement itself.

The paper has also underlined that moral migration is also shaped by factors such as class, race and sexuality, as well as capabilities, which collectively inform the demographic profile of those who migrate and their underlying motivations. For instance, LGBTQ migrants, and young educated or professional Russians form a significant proportion of those who have left, suggesting a generational divide in the country of origin, where these groups and older generations are at odds with the prevailing politics and policies of their country of origin.

Beyond the Russian context, the concepts of moral migration and transnationalism can be fruitfully applied to other authoritarian regimes, where migration serves as a form of moral protest against not only war, but authoritarian practices, corruption and the curtailment of civil liberties. The concept is particularly valuable for analysing the politics of conscientious objectors, dissidents and the broader dynamics of who migrates and why. For instance, in Israel a notable number of citizens have emigrated in response to the government's domestic policies following the 2023 October Hamas attacks and Israel's ongoing genocide of Gaza. Many are questioning the moral legitimacy of their country (Al-Shalchi, 2024; Greene, 2024), and in the diaspora anti-Zionist movements are gaining traction amongst American Jews who are taking a firm moral stance and

transnational action against Israel, as well as the US's military support (Feld, 2024). Furthermore, amidst intensifying anti-migration debates in the US and Europe, incorporating morality into the study of migration and transnationalism offers an essential lens for understanding the geopolitics of migration in the international.

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