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Russia's War in Ukraine: The Development of Russian Illiberalism and Migration in Central Asia

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*Published in:*

Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe

*DOI:*

[10.33134/HUP-26-9](https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-26-9)

2024

*Document Version:*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Heusala, A.-L., & Eraliev, S. (2024). Russia's War in Ukraine: The Development of Russian Illiberalism and Migration in Central Asia. In A.-L. Heusala, K. Aitamurto, & S. Eraliev (Eds.), *Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe* (pp. 287-314). Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-26-9>

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## CHAPTER 9

# Russia's War in Ukraine

## The Development of Russian Illiberalism and Migration in Central Asia

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### Abstract

This chapter analyses the impact which Russia's war in Ukraine, as the manifestation of illiberal politics in Russia, has had on migration. We outline key developments in Russia's security policy and the shift towards ideological and disruptive illiberalism rooted in Soviet and imperial traditions and examine the war's impact on mobilities within and from Central Asia, specifically looking at what these changing dynamics mean for illiberalism and authoritarian rule in the region. The analysis points to the fact that Russian illiberalism has formed a loose state ideology, resulting in a balancing act between political and economic goals in the Global

#### **How to cite this book chapter:**

Heusala, Anna-Liisa and Sherzod Eraliev. 2024. 'Russia's War in Ukraine: The Development of Russian Illiberalism and Migration in Central Asia.' In *Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe*, edited by Anna-Liisa Heusala, Kaarina Aitamurto, and Sherzod Eraliev, 287–313. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-26-9>.

East and Global South and utilizing forced migration and refugees as a hybrid tool to influence the outcome of the war. Ultimately, the way in which migration is addressed in the region is likely to have significant implications for the future of illiberalism.

**Keywords:** Ukraine war, Russia, illiberalism, migration, security policy, Central Asia, authoritarianism

## Introduction

Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to escalate his support for the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine into a full-scale military attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war not only have caused a serious security and humanitarian crisis but also have far-reaching implications for the political, economic, and social dynamics of Eurasia. The war has been seen by some as a way for Putin to assert Russian dominance in the region and rally domestic support for his regime. Regardless of the complex set of motivations behind the war, it has had a dramatic impact on the lives and mobility of people in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as on the broader geopolitical landscape of Europe and Eurasia.

Millions of displaced Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere because of the conflict, causing a significant migration crisis in Europe. This migration crisis has had far-reaching consequences for both the countries hosting refugees and the refugees themselves. Concurrently, the war has changed the migration landscape of Russia, one of the largest migration hubs in the world. The events on the ground in both Ukraine and Russia also show the return of the instrumentalization of migration as a form of warfare.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the impact which the war—as the ultimate manifestation of post-socialist-era illiberal politics in Russia—has had on migration in the region. Based on research literature, government documents, statistics of international organizations, and media reports, we define the key elements in the development of Russian illiberal politics leading up

to its war in Ukraine, the war's impact in the Russian labour market and on migrant workers from Central Asia, and the instrumentalization of migration during the war.

First, we outline key developments in Russia's security policy which have been impacted by ideological and disruptive (Kauth and King 2020) versions of illiberalism, with important outcomes for governmental policymaking and administrative culture. We highlight the erosion of procedural democratic norms resulting from the overall securitization of Russian policymaking. Both forms of illiberalism propose solutions that are majoritarian, underline sovereignty in questions pertaining to internal matters, and shift attention from politics to culture (e.g. Laruelle 2022).

The second part of the chapter looks at the war's impact on mobilities within and from Central Asia, specifically looking at what these changing dynamics mean for illiberalism and authoritarian rule in the region. Western sanctions imposed on Russia have had a significant impact on its economy, which is the largest employer of Central Asian migrant workers. This, in turn, has caused economic and social pressure in remittance-dependent countries of the region as well as so-called 'reverse migration'—the relocation from Russia to Central Asia of refugees or those escaping conscription. Since the war in Ukraine is ongoing with no clear prospects of perspectives, our analysis focuses on short- and mid-term consequences.

### **Illiberalism in Russian Security Politics and the War in Ukraine**

Before 2014, the Russian Federation was a state with macroeconomic stability and potential for continuing modernization and institutional changes. In 2022 Russia began to wage a full-fledged war against Ukraine, and it competes for a position among the illiberal political regimes of the Global East and the Global South. Discussions about a visa-free regime between Russia and the EU now belong to another era, while Russia's previous technocratic, narrow approach to modernization (Gel'man et al. 2021) has

turned into an ideological struggle with the perceived hegemonic enemy, the United States, and a revision of the previous formally democratic structures of the state.

Illiberalism in Russian security politics, which we claim to be a major reason behind the war in Ukraine, is based on the specificities of both the Soviet and the imperial eras. Both time periods, except for the Great Reforms in the mid-nineteenth century and the *perestroika* period, were dominated by various degrees of nationalistic, imperialist, and authoritarian governance. Nationalism and imperialism in the Soviet period took the form of forced internationalism and colonization of new regions and nations under the auspices of socialist state building. As Heusala (2018) has explained, Russian migration policy is built on the early Soviet experiences of population control, in which ‘national security’ was an essential component of policy developments. Russia has followed the global trend of securitization of legislation and administrative policies underlying the re-emergence of national security as an important policy framework. Linked to the development of national security is the selection of high-risk policy domains, receiving increasing public resources and gaining political support for organizational and legal changes. Yet, historically, Russian national security can also be seen as a form of ‘protectionism’ from the outside world and its negative influences, used by past Russian rulers. This underscores the significance of culture in security politics, which has shaped ideological illiberalism (Kauth and King 2020) more generally in Russian politics, a development which can also be seen as a backlash against the experiences of the 1990s transition period.

Miklóssy (2022) has previously stated that disappointment with the accelerated post-socialist transition undermined the liberal argument in the post-socialist states and created room for leadership able to provide simple explanations of complex issues. The liberal order became challenged by what she calls ‘new conservatism’, which was combined with nationalism to boost its popularity. Miklóssy argues that unlike in the West, this trend is first and foremost a criticism of Western values and the dominance

of the West within globalization. Schwartz (2016) has pointed out that political elites in power are endowed with a wide range of administrative means to secure communication channels and implant the 'official' interpretation of history into the collective consciousness. Miklóssy (2022) argues that this interpretation must be passed on from generation to generation as core codes of identity of the community, as a shared understanding of national traumas, freedom fights, wars, and the moment of achieving independence. Especially important are cultural traumas, which present social pain as a fundamental threat to the sense of who people are, where they come from, and where they want to go. Traumas are apparent in the narratives of national crises; xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-liberal, traditional, family, and religious values; and attitudes towards minorities (Miklóssy 2022, 5). In the case of Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent radical changes present such a national and cultural trauma.

The Soviet legacy in memory politics has persisted over several decades during the post-Soviet period. Illiberalism in post-socialist Russia has been a continuation of historically embedded conceptions of the security of the state and the sovereign's rule. Kangaspuro (2022) illustrates how the officially nurtured interpretation of the Great Patriotic War leans on representations of Stalin as the commander-in-chief. As the memory of the War turned into a founding myth of state identity, people's need to share a glorious narrative of the common past has overshadowed alternative interpretations of the trauma, while at the individual level, perceptions of Stalin can be more complex and highly critical.

An important component in the evolution of post-socialist Russian illiberalism has been what Kauth and King (2020) call opposition to procedural democratic norms, or disruptive illiberalism. The Russian electoral authoritarian regime has relied upon performance-based legitimacy built on political institutions that have emulated elections, political parties, and legislatures, but have performed different functions (e.g. Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012). For this reason, the leadership has been more vulnerable

to political disequilibrium (Gel'man et al. 2021). Gel'man (2016) has pointed out that in Russia, rent seeking has been not just a side effect of corruption and inefficiency but the major goal and substantive purpose of governing Russia, and formal institutions of the state have been arranged to serve the private goals of insiders of the bureaucracy. These developments may be regarded as the result of the purposeful strategies of political and economic actors, who aim to maximize their benefits and consolidate their power and wealth (Gel'man et al. 2021). In such circumstances the elite's political vulnerability provides more incentives for the leadership to make policy changes if they perceive major domestic and international threats to their political survival. (Gel'man et al. 2021)

The 1990s presented a moment when demographic crisis, crime and terrorism, and integration into international systems (such as the Council of Europe in 1996) were high on the agenda, aligned with the democratization of the country. This was followed by the accent on economic growth and stability in the early 2000s, which saw major legal and administrative reforms bringing Russia formally closer to European structures and practices. At this time, the Russian government adopted a mixture of reform policies influenced by New Public Management and more traditional statist thinking, based on the idea that a strong state could best provide a necessary social contract with society. A shift towards more traditional national security thinking as the overarching policy-making framework began as early as 2008, followed by attention to long-awaited military and police reforms, spheres of influence in the foreign policy arena, family policy, pension reform, and anti-terrorism and anti-extremism policies. This was a moment when the dissatisfaction with the new borders of Europe and Russia's standing in the new architecture was openly declared. Since 2014, illiberalism in Russian politics has been reinforced through the memory and identity politics linked with the annexation of Crimea, intense securitization of society and political control, and subsequent constitutional changes in 2020, which ultimately paved way to the aggression against Ukraine.

The question of sovereignty and willingness to assimilate new legal thinking has been at the centre of Russian transition since its Constitution of 1993. Russian participation in the Council of Europe system projected a broad willingness to modernize its legal culture. In the past ten years, Russian conceptions of sovereignty have become more prominent in its legal thinking, which has given further legitimation to centralization and the power vertical, and which is one of key elements in the 2021 Security Strategy (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, No. 400 of 2 July 2021). Legislation on foreign agents and the prohibition of homosexual 'propaganda' (Kondakov 2012) presented developments towards this mindset, framed as 'clashes of modernity' in Russia. Preklik (2011) has argued that the Russian state has effectively securitized human rights by using national myths, constructing the image of negative Western-led globalization and of the danger of assimilation and loss of Russian culture. Thus, human rights and other liberal principles are considered less important than social identity. The illiberal political understanding is that rights need to be accepted progressively, respecting the level of development of Russian society, its institutions, and the overall state of the economy, and translated into the Russian context. The 2021 Security Strategy describes this conflict as a situation induced by unfriendly Western countries forcing their way of life on Russian society to destabilize the Russian state. The Russian posture, therefore, is to protect its own way of life and sphere of influence from these adversary influences promoted by liberal forces.

At the heart of the Russia's national security thinking lies the relations of the three branches of government, both formal and informal, which are critical from the rule-of-law perspective. Legal structures and practices serve as a key venue for the mechanisms of illiberal politics and the development of state–society relations. In their assessment of Russian administration, administrative law, and procedure, Heusala and Koroteev (2023, 405) state that in the post-Soviet era

the Russian Supreme Court has ... equipped itself with a developed set of tools to operate the review of the regulations of the federal and regional executive beyond mere violation of law: *contrôle of conventionalité*, review of legal certainty, legitimate aims, factual basis, and most recently, proportionality ... But the number of cases and elaborate criteria do not create a system of administrative justice if they are not evenly applied by impartial and independent judges. Assessment of legal certainty and proportionality cannot become effective safeguards against abuse if they are applied in only a handful of cases. The same holds true in the application of international law: it is referred to if it favors the state, but omitted when it favors the individual—by no stretch of the imagination can this approach be called even-handed. When the Court gives unlimited discretion to the executive, it merely effaces itself and returns to the pre-*perestroika* situation: administrative action and regulation free from any review whatsoever.

The 2020 amendments to the Constitution consolidated this situation, being the most dramatic legal change since the acceptance of the 1993 Constitution that paved way for Russian integration into international legal structures in the 1990s. Article 79 in the amended 2020 Constitution states that ‘Decisions of interstate bodies adopted on the basis of the provisions of international treaties of the RF which, as they are interpreted, contradict the constitution of the RF, shall not be enforced in the RF’. Included is a clause stating that ‘The RF is taking measures to maintain and strengthen international peace and security, ensure the peaceful coexistence of states and peoples, and prevent interference in the internal affairs of the state’ (Teague 2020, 308). In addition, the amendments centralized even further the powers of the Russian president at the expense of regional and local governments, and reduced the independence of the courts by making nominations of high court judges depend on the president.

The security strategies form a roadmap for Russian state building, while the Law on Security (2010) describes the roles and responsibilities in implementation of policies. National security is

built on the assessment of threats, the birth of societal risk positions, definitions of vital interests, and policy decisions regarding proper action. The Law on Strategic Planning (Federal Law of the Russian Federation 2014) consolidated the development towards a unified ideational, legal, and administrative system of centralized decision-making led by the president of Russia (Heusala 2018, 431, 441). Russian policy towards global migration has been linked with all of the above-mentioned structures, and especially with economic planning, demographic changes, regional development, and questions concerning 'civilizational' and Russian cultural identity. As in many other countries, migration has been seen to increase the working-age population and answer the demands of the labour market in Russia. An increase in the birth rate has been an essential component of Russia's social policy, as there will be a shrinking pool of working-age people in the next decades.

This internal development, particularly regarding the way that the state apparatus is managed, has promoted shifts in foreign policy and a radicalization of political rhetoric. Against the background described here, the most recent developments in Russia's security thinking have been striking, but not entirely surprising. The 2021 Security Strategy draws a picture of a world where conservative and liberal values are in direct confrontation in the struggle for domination over the future world order. On the Russian side, the elitist authoritarian view sees the Russian world as under attack from the West, the ultimate goals of which are linked to the destruction of Russian unity as a state. The culmination of this perspective was achieved in Vladimir Putin's speech during the ceremony marking the accession of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and Zaporozhe and Kherson regions to Russia, on 30 September 2022, where he stated that the West's goal was to make Russia—a thousand-year-old civilization and power—a colony, forced to accept a liberal, double-standard rules-based system. He continued that Western elites used national sovereignty and international law selectively to advance their own colonial ambitions (President of the Russian Federation 2022).

In the worldview of the Russian political elites, Ukraine symbolizes the lost power of the Soviet era, which was a constitutive time for most of the Russian leadership. Ukraine represents the continuation of Russian imperialistic rule, as well as a state in the USSR, which should never have left the union and the Russian sphere of influence. Western-led globalization, in this perspective, is a destructive force that should be contained in order to preserve authentic national culture and economic sovereignty. At the same time, the Soviet legacy in post-socialist Russian illiberalism is visible in the view, represented by the Russian elite, that the sovereignty of some countries is simply more important and significant, while the sovereignty of others is merely tolerated as a part of the security architecture established by great powers. The logic behind the attack on Ukraine stands on this premise.

From this perspective, Ukraine represents a battleground between two global powers with different world visions. For Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union could be corrected at least partially by permanent Russian occupation of economically intensive areas of eastern Ukraine. This logic has offered an incentive for the Russian government to continue the highly costly war since 2014, even with the immense human suffering, degradation of the environment, and geopolitical tensions in the region. The war has had significant consequences for global politics in many areas, including illiberalism and migration in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The events in Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 had already caused a new wave of forced migration. The military conflict in the east of Ukraine led to the emergence of more than 1.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine and more than a million people leaving the country (Roman et al. 2021). In Russian domestic policies, nationalistic rhetoric regarding the societal effects of migration have influenced risk assessments in economy and national culture. Lassila (2017) has pointed out that after 2014, Ukrainian refugees were portrayed positively in Russian mainstream media, although the Ukrainian state was heavily criticized.

As the study by Virkkunen, Silvan, and Piipponen in this volume ([Chapter 7](#)) shows, the instrumentalization of global migration, and particularly war refugees, has also been included in the arsenal of so-called hybrid methods of influence, aimed at putting political pressure on liberal-democratic societies and testing their resilience in times of crises. Thus, one aspect of the crisis for the Russian side is to see the extent of European societies' resilience. Between 24 February 2022 and 14 March 2024, nearly 6.5 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across the globe, the majority of whom (6 million, or 93 per cent) were recorded in Europe. More than 5.5 million refugees from Ukraine applied for asylum, temporary protection, or similar national protection schemes in Europe. The three main countries where people registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes have been Poland (1.6 million), Germany (1.1 million), and Czechia (590,000) (UNCHR 2024). The influx of Ukrainian refugees initially put pressure on host societies in Eastern Europe and the European Union, leading to concerns about the sustainability of long-term provision of social services.

Under the adversary relations between Russia and Western nations, it is reasonable to suspect that the Russian government expected the political support for Ukraine to progressively dissipate in the context of the economic burden caused by both the influx of war refugees and the financial support given to Ukraine, particularly right after the already economically difficult period of the global pandemic. However, the Temporary Protection Directive in the European Union and similar schemes in other countries, coupled with Ukrainian refugees' formal qualifications and diaspora networks, have led to faster integration compared with other refugee groups in OECD countries. In a few European OECD countries (including Poland, the UK, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Estonia), the share of the working-age Ukrainian refugee population in employment had already reached over 40 per cent in 2023 (OECD 2023).

By 2023, the Russian Federation itself had recorded over 2,850,000 Ukrainian refugees in its territory (UNHCR 2023).

Among these displaced people are those who have entered through the so-called 'filtration camps' (Kortava 2022) from eastern parts of Ukraine to Russia, of whom at least a portion have been coerced to accept Russian passports (Kvitka 2023). The alleged deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied Ukrainian territories for 're-education' and possible adoption by Russian families demonstrates the return of 1940s warfare, only now in the era of globalized social media activism, which makes such strategies hard to disguise. The outcome of the alleged unlawful deportation and transfer of population (children) was the issuing of an arrest warrant on 17 March 2023, for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, based on Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute, by the Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court (ICC 2023).

Similarly, as Russia's war is causing the biggest refugee flows in Europe since the Second World War, it is also utilizing forced migration to advance illiberal political goals inside of Russian borders. For the Russian government, the war refugees coming from Ukraine to Russia have presented an opportunity to advance propaganda goals among national audiences, most of whom have limited access to alternative media sources. Similarly, for the home audience, the Russian leadership and the main national media consistently undermine the significance of those fleeing political tension and possible conscription in Russia to its neighbouring countries. The 'purification' of Russian society of unwanted and unsuitable people is depicted as an unimportant, mundane, or even to some extent positive effect of the 'special military operation'. Thus, the war in Ukraine has advanced the exploitation of migration and refugees for military, political, and economic purposes. As the Russian Federation has severed ties with the international legal structures erected to protect human rights, the development has presented itself as an important culmination point of illiberal politics in Russia.

## Russian Migration Policy and Central Asian Migration since 2022

Since 1991, Russian migration policies have undergone significant transformations, reflecting the country's struggle to define its identity and relationships with former Soviet republics (Abashin 2017). Migration policy in Russia has continued to be an arena where appeals for cultural affinity and societal consensus have coincided with perceived threats of economic and military influence over Russian national interests and global threats such as international terrorism (Heusala 2018). It is an important part of Russia's official security thinking, as reflected in its 2015 and 2021 security strategies.

As Abashin (2017) has analysed, migration policies, initially shaped by the collapse of the USSR, delineated distinctions between refugees and forcibly displaced persons, signalling preferences for former Soviet citizens. Efforts to support compatriots abroad evolved into simplified procedures for acquiring Russian citizenship in the 1990s. However, by the early 2000s, policies had shifted towards categorizing migrants as 'ours' versus 'others' and prioritizing certain ethnicities for citizenship. This trend continued with the narrowing of the 'compatriot' definition in 2012, emphasizing ties to Russian territory and culture. Subsequent reforms aimed to regulate migrant flows, with measures such as deportation and stricter residency requirements. Despite the intention to attract foreign labour and streamline legalization, policies often resulted in confusion and contradiction, reflecting a complex interplay of economic, demographic, and political considerations, sometimes influenced by populist rhetoric. Overall, as Abashin (2017) argues, Russian migration policy has reflected a nuanced balancing act between competing interests, ideologies, and geopolitical realities since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Migration flows between Russia and Central Asia have also connected various foreign policy goals in the Eurasian space. For the Kremlin, 'migration served as one of those trump cards forcing Central Asian governments to accept Moscow's rules' (Eraliev

and Urinboyev 2023, 7). The Eurasian Economic Union has been one of the key foreign and economic policy goals of Putin's presidency. It has consisted of economic integration, and a post-Cold War world idea of Greater Europe and Russia's role in Eurasia (Sakwa 2015, 18–19). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a large-scale shadow economy has been an important component of this integration (Kangaspuro and Heusala 2017). Lane (2015) has pointed out that Eurasia is crucially important for Russia's policy because of globalization. He sees the Eurasian Economic Union as a regional economic formation aimed at constructing the multipolar world order preferred by Russia's foreign policy.

We argue that the relationship between migration and illiberalism can be a mutually reinforcing one. Well before the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, the labour market shared by Russia and its neighbours *de facto* created an area of economic integration. Russian migration policy has been based on maintaining collaboration with Central Asian leaders whose governments rely on circular migration to alleviate economic development challenges and managing the two sides of the war refugee crisis in a tactically suitable way to sustain political domestic credibility. Migration, particularly the high number of workers leaving their home countries for employment opportunities in other countries, as is the case in Central Asia, can serve as a safety valve for sending-country governments by reducing domestic unemployment and social unrest. Long-standing factors behind the migration to Russia from former Soviet republics include contrasts in quality of life; the contraction of Russia's working-age population; regional conflicts; job creation relative to population growth, attitude to migrants, and prospects for their naturalization; the size of existing diasporas in Russia; and the prospects for the overall stability of the state and its popular perception (Ioffe 2020). In turn, Russia, which has utilized neoliberal economic policies, has been able to use migration effectively as a means of maintaining elite consolidation by creating the conditions for economic growth and the control of mass media discussion about migration, and to restrict the work of NGOs and labour unions. Russian labour

markets have included an important component of 'semi-legality', where the economy relies on people whose status is 'in between' (e.g. Kubal 2013), forcing the society to balance domestic policies and the demands of international economic and political regimes (Heusala 2018).

While a gradual decline in labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia can be observed in the years following Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russia persists as the primary destination. Following the outbreak of full-scale aggression by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, Western countries imposed all-out sanctions on the Russian economy. This prompted many academic and policy experts to predict a mass exodus of migrant workers from Russia, particularly from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which constituted most of the migrant workforce (CABAR 2022). Despite economic and political crises in the past two decades, migration patterns between Russia and Central Asia have remained resilient (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). Nonetheless, the unprecedented nature of the 2022 sanctions led many to believe that labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia might come to an end.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine had various effects on migrants, with some opting not to go to Russia for ethical reasons while many others believed that the war would bring about more economic opportunities (Schenk 2023). During the first weeks after the start of the war, experts predicted that Western sanctions could bring a slowing down of Russia's economic growth, which could lead to reduced demand for migrant labour. This would have made it more challenging for Central Asian migrants to find employment, as there would be fewer job opportunities. However, labour mobility from Central Asia to Russia proved to be resilient once again. The Russian authorities managed to prevent a total collapse of their economy, employing administrative measures to stabilize the ruble exchange rate, an important factor in Central Asian labour migrants' decision to stay on in Russia. However, foreign workers who chose to stay in Russia encountered heightened security measures, were unfairly blamed for problems, and were

even directly recruited to join the war (Ozodlik 2023; Najibullah 2023; Putz 2023).

Moreover, Russian citizenship has long been seen as a pathway to a better life for many Central Asian migrants (Schenk 2023). In the past, it was sought-after as it offered migrants the ability to bypass bureaucratic hurdles and avoid harassment by the police. It also provided access to better-paying jobs and improved social services. For example, approximately 145,000 people from Central Asia became Russian citizens in 2020, demonstrating a growing interest among many migrant workers even in the COVID-19 pandemic year (Voices on Central Asia 2021). However, with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent drafting of Russian citizens into military service, the once-desirable status of Russian citizenship has become toxic for many Central Asians who had become 'new Russians'. Many Central Asians who had obtained Russian citizenship found themselves subject to military service in the Russian army, forcing them to participate in the war effort in Ukraine. The Russian government made clear its plans to attract migrants from Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to join its armed forces. This move was part of a larger strategy that was set in motion when, in early 2024, Putin approved a streamlined process for foreign nationals to obtain Russian citizenship after serving one year in the military (TASS 2024). Hundreds, and possibly even thousands, of Central Asians have been reported to be working on the occupied territories of Ukraine. Despite warnings from their respective governments to avoid travelling to Ukraine and the dangerous conditions, these migrants continue to be lured to the war-torn region by promises of high wages from construction firms in Russia and intermediaries (Khashimov 2023).

The conscription of Central Asian migrants who had acquired Russian citizenship has led to a re-evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of obtaining citizenship in Russia, and many have decided to forego the process of obtaining citizenship altogether, choosing instead to remain as temporary workers with limited rights and protections. In response, Russian authorities have

threatened to strip Russian citizenship from naturalized citizens from Central Asia if they refuse to join Russia's war in Ukraine (Najibullah 2023). The only exception concerns citizens from Tajikistan, the poorest country in the region, which has a dual citizenship agreement with the Russian Federation. The number of Tajiks who have obtained Russian citizenship has been constantly on the rise during the 2010s and early 2020s, and is equal to the number of naturalized citizens from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan combined. In 2022, while the number of newly naturalized Kyrgyz and especially Uzbeks in Russia decreased, around 174,000 people with origins in Tajikistan received Russian citizenship—a sharp increase from almost 104,000 in 2021 and 63,000 in 2020 (Eurasianet 2023).

Russia's war against Ukraine has caused a significant shift in the employment patterns of Central Asian migrants, who have traditionally looked to Russia as their primary destination for work. As the war became more protracted, both the governments and the citizens of Central Asia have been forced to explore other job opportunities elsewhere. The desire to seek alternative destinations will likely increase, particularly among migrants from Tajikistan, following the terrorist attacks at Moscow's Crocus City Hall on 22 March 2024, where a group of individuals from Tajikistan were implicated as perpetrators. Subsequently, Russian authorities have initiated a crackdown on Central Asian migrant workers through large-scale raids and the implementation of draconian restrictions. The political instability and economic turmoil that have resulted from the war have made many Central Asian governments more determined to reduce their reliance on Russia as a source of employment for their citizens. Despite its economic challenges, one of the main destinations that has emerged as an alternative to Russia is Türkiye, which shares linguistic and religious ties with many Central Asian countries and maintains a visa-free entrance regime for citizens from these countries (Urinboev and Eraliev 2022).

While the Russian labour market offering jobs to millions of migrants may seem beneficial for Central Asian economies, it

also creates potential challenges for their authoritarian regimes. If many migrant workers return home due to a serious economic crisis in Russia, this could lead to increased unemployment and social unrest, putting regime stability in the region at risk. To mitigate this risk, Central Asian governments will continue to pursue authoritarian modernization policies (Gel'man 2016), aiming to develop their economies while maintaining tight control over society and politics. However, this may come at the expense of civil liberties and democratic values, as governments may tighten their grip on civil society through illiberal practices such as restricting civil liberties and maintaining tight control over the media and civil society and suppressing dissenting voices.

The war in Ukraine has brought up another dynamic to migration patterns in Russia and Central Asia: the exodus from Russia. The majority of those who left during the first six months of the war, except for political dissidents, had the financial means and social connections for a smooth relocation of their families and businesses abroad to destinations such as Türkiye, Georgia, Armenia, and to a lesser extent Central Asia (Matusevich 2022). When Russian authorities announced a partial mobilization of men of military age in late September 2022, to compensate for the losses of manpower in Ukraine, the announcement caused many Russians to leave the country in response. Some estimates suggest that by early 2023 between 700,000 and 1,200,000 Russians may have left the country since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Gulina 2022). This exodus has implications not just for Russian internal politics but also for societies in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, where most of these Russians moved. While such countries as Türkiye, Thailand, and Vietnam received a considerable number of draft-dodgers, countries of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia and the South Caucasus were the main destinations. Zavadskaya, Kamalov, and Sergeeva's chapter in this volume ([Chapter 8](#)) discusses the potential influence of the emigrant Russian diaspora on Russian internal politics following the exodus of Russians to other countries after the start of the

war in Ukraine. Here, we intend to briefly examine the potential implications of this migration for societies in Central Asia.

Central Asia has historically been a destination for migration from Russia, with many ethnic Russians migrating to the region during Tzarist and Soviet times. However, in recent years the flow of migration has largely been in the opposite direction, with many Central Asians migrating to Russia for work and economic opportunities. The recent exodus of Russians from Russia may lead to a reversal of this trend, with some ethnic Russians returning to Central Asia. Russians have chosen Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for emigration due to various factors. These include visa-free entry, direct border lines with Russia (in the case of Kazakhstan), a relatively low cost of living, favourable conditions for legalization, and the prevalence of the Russian language, especially in large cities (Pheiffer 2022). Russians may have found it easier to integrate into these societies due to shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds, as well as existing social networks. Even as the long-term integration of Russians remains an open question, it is still important to note that a considerable number have managed to settle across Central Asia.

The arrival of many Russians to Central Asia has had a mixed reaction across the region. The situation has led to concerns about the impact on local cultures and traditions. The war in Ukraine has sparked discussions on decolonial discourse among Eurasian and international scholars, with some calling on Russians to acknowledge Russia's imperial identity, including the colonial nature of the Soviet regime, to improve their relations with neighbouring countries (countries formerly part of the Soviet Union) and the West (Kassymbekova and Marat 2022). Some people fear that Russians, with their imperial mindset, may become a 'fifth column' and aid the Russian government in its neocolonial discourse. Referring to the concerns of local activists, Sergey Abashin (2023, paragraph 7) mentions that:

on the one hand, they [locals] see migrants as competitors and, on the other hand, as a group that could reproduce the old Soviet

divisions, when locals used to occupy lower positions, while outsiders used to get the higher ones ... with 'Russians' being the more prestigious group. Locals had already become accustomed to occupying more prestigious positions and they are kind of afraid that the Russians will come and try to build an empire.

The way in which the Russians are referred to highlights the varying attitudes towards their mass arrival, in turn reflecting people's stance on the war in Ukraine. Russians generally prefer to be called *relokanty*, which refers to employees relocated abroad by their companies. A part of the local population in receiving countries, opposing the war, refers to them as refugees, while others see them as draft-dodgers who have shirked their duty to defend their motherland in times of need. For some observers, the migration of Russians, either short term or long term, to Central Asia is a 'humbling moment', as Russians, who had always perceived themselves to be privileged both in the Soviet Union and in contemporary Russia, now find themselves as guests in independent countries (Meduza 2023). Overall, people's perception of the arrival of Russians highlights the complex interplay between migration, Soviet legacies, authoritarianism, and cultural shifts.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to create an overview of Russian security policy developments, migration policy as a part of the national security thinking, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Eurasian migration and refugee situation. It argues that the radicalization of Russian illiberal politics has resulted in an unprecedented upheaval of the economic, political, and military landscape in the former socialist space of Eurasia. The analysis points to the fact that Russian illiberalism has formed a loose state ideology resulting in a balancing act between political and economic goals in the Global East and Global South and utilizing forced migration and refugees as a hybrid tool to influence the outcome of the war.

At the heart of the Russian policymaking and administration lie the problematic relations of the three branches of government, both formal and informal, which are critical for the development of a country's legal culture. Borrowing the definitions of illiberalism of Kauth and King (2020) we state that Russia's post-socialist security thinking has evolved around both ideological illiberalism, which underlines sovereignty, nationhood, and majoritarianism (Laruelle 2022), and disruptive illiberalism, which challenges international norms, which Russia again sees as interfering with its internal affairs, as did the Soviet Union. The war, initiated already in 2014, can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of Russian illiberalism, as it has showcased the country's shift towards an ideology that prioritizes a highly centralized administrative system and authoritarian narrow economic modernization, accepts weak legal protection, and underlines nationalism in many key policy areas. Russia's legislative and administrative developments have led to the application of international law in a selective way and to an oppositional attitude towards democratic processes. The independence of the judiciary has been replaced with the broad discretion of the executive, which has also impacted the outcomes of migration policy. The exploitation of migration as a form of warfare further highlights the illiberal politics and disregard for human rights.

Consequently, the war in Ukraine and the resulting migration crisis have had profound political, economic, and social implications for Russia and Central Asia. The influx of Ukrainian refugees into Europe has put pressure on host societies and raised concerns about integration and the economic sustainability of required social services. Additionally, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia have had a significant impact on its economy, affecting the largest employer of Central Asian migrant workers. This has led to economic and social pressures in Central Asia's remittance-dependent countries.

The changed conditions for labour migration as a result of Western sanctions have created new challenges for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, as the return of several hundred

thousand migrants from Russia has put pressure on their vulnerable economies. The resulting social dissent, driven by declining living standards and unemployment, may exacerbate existing tensions and create new challenges for these regimes. Migration, particularly the high number of workers leaving their home countries for employment opportunities in other countries, can serve as a safety valve for sending-country governments by reducing domestic unemployment and social unrest. In turn, receiving authoritarian governments relying on neoliberal economic policies can effectively use globalized migration as a means of maintaining elite consolidation through economic growth and control of mass media information and discussion about migration; restrict the work of NGOs and unions; and coerce both migrants and sending countries through the weak legal status of migrants. Given these challenges, it is unclear how governments in the Eurasian region will respond. While some may choose to undertake much-needed political and economic liberalization to address the consequences of the war, others could resort to tighter authoritarian rule.

Overall, the war in Ukraine and the migration crisis have exposed the deepening illiberalism in Russia and its impact on neighbouring regions. The consequences of this crisis will continue to unfold in the short and medium term, shaping the political, economic, and social dynamics of Eurasia. The response of governments in the region will determine whether there will be a shift towards political and economic liberalization or a further consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Ultimately, the way in which labour migration is addressed is likely to have significant implications for the future of illiberalism in the region. For this reason, we propose to pay attention to the responses of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia to social dissent stemming from the return of migrant workers from Russia, as well as the integration processes of other migrant groups which have left Russia since the outbreak of the war. This line of inquiry offers a nuanced understanding of how these regimes navigate social tensions and dissent within their societies. By analysing the policy choices made by governments, as well as the

implementation of their decisions—whether they opt for political and economic liberalization or tighten authoritarian controls to maintain stability—researchers can shed light on the delicate balance of state power, social cohesion, and dissent in authoritarian contexts. At the same time, probing the impact which diaspora communities have on Russia and its future politics offers insights into the resilience of Russian illiberal politics and its future trajectories.

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