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Russian Migrants in Serbia: Diaspora Fragmentation, Identity Politics, and Strategic Ambiguity

ANASTASIJA MLADENOVSKA*

Miami University, US

Introduction

Serbia occupies a distinctive place in the post-2022 European migration landscape. Neither aligned with the EU's foreign-policy consensus nor fully committed to its historical partnership with Russia, Serbia maintains a foreign-policy strategy defined by strategic ambiguity, a deliberate oscillation between Western and Russian orientations to preserve political flexibility (Vučković and Radeljić 2024; Bogdanović 2024; Costamagna 2025; Kazharski 2023). Scholarship on small-state geopolitics and hedging describes such ambiguity as a purposeful tool of statecraft (Kuik 2008; Kuik 2021; Wang et al. 2024; Vučković and Radeljić 2024), yet its consequences for migrant populations remain undertheorized, particularly in a broader European context where pro-Russian political alignments have been destabilized but not entirely displaced (Braghiroli 2023). This article examines how strategic ambiguity shapes the lived experiences and political orientations of post-2022 Russian migrants who have arrived in Serbia in significant numbers following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Although precise figures vary, available reporting indicates substantial inflows: Serbia's Ministry of Internal Affairs issued more than 30,000 temporary residence permits to Russian citizens between February 2022 and mid-2023, civil-society actors estimate around 50,000 legally staying migrants, and journalistic assessments place the broader number, including visa-free and short-term arrivals, between 100,000 and 400,000 (Vasović 2024; Martinović 2024; Balkan Insight 2024; Faldin 2024; Cvijić and Nikolić 2025). These individuals form one of the most consequential new migrant communities in the region. Yet despite the scale of arrival, this population has not coalesced into a cohesive diaspora nor followed conventional trajectories of integration, politicization, or exile. Instead, interviews conducted in Belgrade and Novi Sad reveal a pervasive sense of suspension: migrants repeatedly describe Serbia as "safe but temporary," "a pause," or "a place to wait," even when they have no immediate plans to leave.

* *mladena@miamioh.edu*; ORCID: 0009-0000-2629-5394.

This article argues that this sense of suspension is not merely a psychological reaction, but a structurally produced orientation shaped by Serbia's ambiguous geopolitical alignment (Andersson 2014; Marotta 2025; von Löwis and Eschment 2022). I contend that strategic ambiguity functions as a host-state condition that generates uncertainty about long-term incorporation, encourages provisional and reversible settlement strategies, and contributes to fragmented and uneven processes of diasporisation. I adopt a practice-oriented view of diasporisation, treating it as a gradual and contingent process shaped by everyday routines rather than fixed identities (Brubaker 2006; Clifford 1994; Pahor 2023). In Serbia, this process becomes marked by hesitancy and caution: migrants adjust their self-presentation, political expression, and forms of community engagement in ways that maintain flexibility and minimize exposure amid unclear institutional and geopolitical signals (Butler 2021; de Genova 2002; Klumbyte and Šliavaite 2021; Tsourapas 2018).

The article is guided by one central research question: How does Serbia's strategic ambiguity shape the everyday practices, identity negotiations, and emergent forms of belonging among post-2022 Russian migrants? To answer this question, I connect the macro-level logic of strategic ambiguity with the micro-level experiences of migrants whose futures in Serbia remain unsettled. In doing so, I show how the host state's ambivalent foreign-policy stance filters downward into bureaucratic encounters, risk assessments, digital networks, and everyday decisions about visibility, community formation, and political voice.

Empirically, the study draws on ten in-depth oral-history interviews, expert conversations, and long-term online observation of Russian-language online communities. This multi-method approach captures ambivalence as a lived condition rather than an abstract theoretical claim, revealing how migrants navigate Serbia's permissive yet indeterminate settlement regime through improvised infrastructures, selective social ties, and variable identity performances.

By reframing post-2022 Russian mobility to Serbia as a case of suspended migration under strategic ambiguity, this article advances three contributions. First, it extends the concept of strategic ambiguity into the domain of migration governance, demonstrating how state-level ambiguity produces migrant-level uncertainty. Second, it shows how diasporic identities emerge unevenly under conditions of geopolitical liminality rather than institutional clarity or public hostility. Third, it offers Serbia as an analytically revealing counterpoint to major destinations such as Germany, Latvia, and Georgia, illustrating how ambiguous host-state signals generate fragmented civic engagement and ambivalent forms of diaspora formation. The discussion proceeds by outlining the conceptual framework, situating Serbia within this architecture, and analyzing how Russian migrants negotiate and reproduce ambiguity through their everyday practices.

Strategic Ambiguity, Suspended Migration, and Emergent Diasporisation

This article conceptualizes post-2022 Russian migration to Serbia by bringing into dialogue two bodies of scholarship that are rarely placed in direct conversation: practice-oriented work on diasporisation and international-relations literature on strategic ambiguity. Building on critical diaspora studies, I treat diasporisation not as a stable identity or predetermined endpoint but as a gradual, uneven process shaped by everyday practice (Brubaker 2006; Clifford 1994; Mavroudi 2007; Pahor 2023). I extend this framework by introducing strategic ambiguity as the structural condition under which particular forms of migrant belonging take shape, drawing on scholarship that understands ambiguity and hedging as purposive tools of small-state statecraft designed to maximize room for geopolitical maneuver (Kuik 2008; Kuik 2021; Wang et al. 2024; Vučković and Radeljić 2024). When these two literatures are read together, they illuminate how indeterminate host-state commitments cascade downward into migrant orientations, everyday practices, and the tentative consolidation of community.

Strategic ambiguity provides the macro-environment in which migrants settle. In international relations, the term refers to a state's deliberate maintenance of unclear alignments in order to preserve flexibility. Translated into the realm of migration governance, this produces a settlement regime that is permissive at the point of entry yet intentionally noncommittal about long-term belonging. Migrants encounter legal openness but lack clear integration pathways; they experience local sociability yet receive inconsistent signals about the host state's geopolitical direction. Ambivalence, in this context, is not merely an emotional reaction but a structurally generated orientation embedded in institutional design (von Löwis and Eschment 2022; Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021).

Within that landscape, migration takes on a suspended form (Coutin 2019). Individuals move under political, moral, or economic pressure, yet they do not interpret this movement as definitive resettlement. Instead, they inhabit a temporality shaped by contingency and conditionality. Futures remain reversible; commitments are kept intentionally light; decisions are made with an eye toward maintaining exit options. This aligns with broader work on protracted uncertainty and involuntary immobility, which shows how migrants adapt when the horizon of settlement remains undefined or potentially retractable (Carling 2002; Collyer 2010). Digital infrastructures amplify this condition by enabling forms of "immobile transnationalism," allowing migrants to remain economically and socially anchored to Russia even while physically present in Serbia (Waters and Leung 2013; Schewel 2019). Suspension becomes a mode of daily life: a way of organizing time, risk, and decision-making under conditions of structural uncertainty (Coutin 2019).

From within this suspended orientation, diasporisation emerges not as a fixed identity but as an adaptive repertoire. Migrants construct forms of community that are provisional, reversible, and grounded in practice rather than institution. They cluster

in particular neighborhoods, maintain Russian-language routines, share bureaucratic heuristics through digital channels, form informal mutual-aid networks, and build micro-communities around cafés, coworking spaces, and supplementary schools. These formations do not seek to stabilize a unified diaspora but instead reflect strategies of coping with opaque institutions and unpredictable futures (Grossman 2019; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015; Zavadskaya and Turchenko 2024). Identity is calibrated rather than declared: migrants continually assess how visible to be, when to speak, and how to present themselves in ways that minimize exposure in an ambiguous political environment (de Genova 2002; Butler 2021; Makarychev 2023). The result is a form of diasporic life that is partial, adaptive, and shaped as much by what the state withholds as by what it provides.

Taken together, this framework maps a clear conceptual sequence without reducing it to a linear model. Strategic ambiguity structures the environment in which migrants find themselves, creating conditions of legal openness paired with institutional indeterminacy. Suspended migration emerges as the dominant orientation within that environment, shaping how individuals organize their futures, decisions, and emotional investments. Out of this suspended condition arise emergent forms of diasporisation: community formations that are fragmented rather than cohesive, provisional rather than permanent, and oriented toward maintaining flexibility rather than consolidating stable institutions. This integrated lens clarifies why diasporic formation in Serbia is neither linear nor inevitable. It is contingent, reversible, and fundamentally shaped by the host state's deliberate maintenance of geopolitical uncertainty.

Strategic Ambiguity in Practice: The Russian Diaspora in Serbia

Post-2022 Russian migration to Serbia reflects a hybrid form of mobility that unsettles standard distinctions between voluntary and forced movement. Few migrants qualify for refugee status, yet many describe leaving under escalating pressures, political repression, opposition to the war, tightening criminalization of dissent, and fear of conscription. Recent scholarship terms this pattern “relocation without resettlement”, a mode of exit shaped by uncertainty and the absence of a clear horizon of return (Gudkov, Inozemtsev, and Nekrasov 2024; Prashizky 2023; Rácz 2024; Kostenko et al. 2025). The population is heterogeneous: IT professionals, remote workers, artists, middle-class families, and politically active individuals navigate Serbia in uneven ways, producing differentiated forms of settlement that reflect variation in class, digital mobility, and political risk assessments (Zavadskaya and Turchenko 2024; Zejnulahović, Pavlović, and Molnar 2024).

Serbia is analytically revealing precisely because it concentrates the conditions theorized in the conceptual framework: a host state governed by strategic ambiguity, a migrant population living suspended futures, and a process of diasporisation unfolding through improvisation rather than formal integration. This sharply contrasts with the logics governing other post-2022 destinations. In Germany, structured pathways and security-driven vetting embed migrants within a rule-bound integration system; in

Latvia, Russian-speaking residents confront loyalty testing, language requirements, and a securitized framing of their presence; in Georgia, hospitality is tempered by war memory, trauma-inflected scrutiny, and expectations of political sensitivity (Birka 2022; Bronnikova, Gavrilova, and Margvelashvili 2025; Zavadskaya 2023). Serbia, by contrast, pairs permissive entry with indeterminate long-term commitments: migrants can arrive and remain with relative ease, but they receive few signals about the rights, obligations, or geopolitical direction that would anchor a durable sense of belonging.

This legal and geopolitical ambiguity translates directly into lived suspension. Futures depend not only on developments in Russia but on Serbia's oscillating orientation – whether it maintains equidistance, leans toward Moscow, or aligns more closely with Brussels. In the absence of predictable long-term pathways, many migrants maintain economic and communicative ties to Russia. Interviewees widely reported hybrid employment arrangements – remote work for Russia-based companies, participation in relocated Russian-speaking IT firms, and fintech-mediated banking solutions – that allow them to remain embedded in transnational circuits while postponing meaningful integration. These practices generate niche labor markets in which linguistic familiarity and digital flexibility become informal assets (Stojić Mitrović 2019; Cvijić and Nikolić 2025). Immobile transnationalism is thus sustained not only by technology but by Serbia's refusal to define what long-term settlement entails.

Diasporisation in Serbia mirrors this suspended condition. Russian cafés, coworking hubs, supplementary schools, neighborhood clusters, Telegram channels, and informal legal-navigation networks function as infrastructures of predictability within an otherwise undefined environment. They emerge not as markers of cohesive diaspora identity but as pragmatic responses to bureaucratic opacity. One interviewee described being told by a clerk to “come back tomorrow – rules change weekly,” encapsulating why many rely on Russian-run intermediaries for navigation and interpretation.

Identity performance likewise reflects the structural indeterminacy of the host environment. Unlike in Germany, where visible political distancing from the Kremlin is expected, or in Latvia, where Russian identity is filtered through security concerns, migrants in Serbia calibrate their visibility to avoid misreading the political landscape. Russian-language public life is possible without stigma, yet explicitly political expression remains subdued. Anti-war actions in Belgrade in 2022–23 – passport burnings, “Russians Against the War” gatherings – briefly made dissent visible, but their decline reflected the crowded protest ecology of the Western Balkans rather than apathy. Migrants described Serbia as a place where one can “be Russian without constantly explaining yourself,” though this ease is mediated by symbolic scripts of Slavic and Orthodox familiarity that shape how Russianness is recognized and accommodated.

The war, however, has transformed the global meaning of Russianness, and many migrants carry an internalized sense of dislocation even when not confronted externally. Interviewees articulated this as an ongoing recalibration: I am Russian → the meaning has

changed → I cannot detach → but I no longer know how to define it. Serbia's permissive environment does not eliminate this internal ambiguity; it reframes it. Acceptance hinges less on explicit declarations of political stance and more on performing a culturally legible, "familiar" Russianness – one rooted in shared traditions, linguistic proximity, and selectively resonant symbolism.

Internal differentiation further reflects the effects of ambiguity. Politically active migrants – journalists, NGO workers, artists, graduate students – initially sought to maintain their political commitments but soon described "voice fatigue" within Serbia's muted civic sphere. Apolitical digital professionals, by contrast, prioritize stability and privacy and view Serbia's ambiguity as enabling. A lifestyle-oriented subset – often partners of relocated tech workers – document daily life in Serbia through Russian-language Instagram accounts, functioning as affective intermediaries and informal guides. Their narratives frequently present Serbia as a reversible experiment; several now chronicle their return to Russia, framing departure as a recalibration rather than failure. Choco Tort's *Srbija* (2025), which fuses post-Soviet diasporic sentiment with Yugoslav pop nostalgia, similarly captures the ambivalence of provisional attachment. A smaller conservative cohort finds cultural affinity with segments of the Serbian public, while a large ambivalent middle avoids political expression altogether, drawing on habits of self-protection shaped by authoritarian contexts. These clusters coexist in parallel rather than coalescing into a unified diaspora, linked more by shared indeterminacy than shared ideology.

Placed in comparative context, Serbia's distinctiveness becomes clearer. In Germany, Russian migrants enter a system defined by institutional clarity, legal predictability, and structured integration pathways. Migrants are expected – socially and sometimes institutionally – to demonstrate political distancing from the Kremlin, a pattern reinforced by existing discourses on security and democratic alignment (Gudkov, Inozemtsev, and Nekrasov 2024; Zavadskaya 2023). Latvia represents an even sharper contrast: its post-Soviet Russian-speaking minority is governed through a securitized lens, shaped by language requirements, loyalty expectations, and the state-led dismantling of Soviet symbolic legacies (Birka 2022). Both contexts impose clear expectations upon Russian newcomers, making everyday life navigable but politically legible in ways that Serbia neither requires nor enforces.

Georgia illustrates a different form of constraint – one rooted in historical memory rather than bureaucracy. Although entry is easy and cultural proximity exists, the legacy of the 2008 war and ongoing occupation produces a moralized public sphere in which Russian presence is scrutinized through trauma-informed vigilance (Bronnikova, Gavrilova, and Margvelashvili 2025). Russian migrants in Georgia often adopt what Listrovaya (2024) terms "strategic non-engagement," a cautious mode of conduct shaped by anticipatory repression, heightened sensitivity to boundaries, and the social expectation to acknowledge local grievance. Survey evidence reinforces this dynamic: late-2022 ZOIS data show that Russian migrants in Georgia expressed significantly higher perceived responsibility for Russia's political future than those in Serbia (Krawatzek and Sasse 2024).

Against these backgrounds, Serbia's approach stands out not because it is uniformly welcoming, but because it is structurally undemanding. The state neither institutionalizes incorporation, nor subjects Russian identity to securitized scrutiny, nor interprets it through the prism of historical trauma. Instead, Serbia's geopolitical ambiguity produces a settlement regime with few political expectations and minimal normative demands. Follow-up survey research shows that in this environment, political engagement diminishes rather than intensifies: 43% of Russian migrants in Serbia who initially felt accountable for Russia's political future later disengaged (Zejnulahović, Pavlović, and Molnar 2024). While Georgian migrants navigate moral vigilance and Latvian migrants navigate security-driven boundaries, Russian migrants in Serbia practice ambiguity-mediated pragmatism – visible yet politically muted, socially connected yet noncommittal, settled yet prepared to reverse course. This divergence underscores how Serbia's strategic ambiguity generates a uniquely reversible and low-commitment form of diasporisation.

Background and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design to examine how post-2022 Russian migrants navigate everyday life, identity, and security in Serbia's strategically ambiguous environment. It integrates ten oral-history interviews with migrants, three expert interviews, and sustained online observation of Russian-language digital communities. See Appendix for the interview guides used with Russian migrants, economists, and the human-rights lawyer.

Fieldwork and Initial Mapping

The project unfolded in two phases. First, I conducted exploratory fieldwork in Serbia and Montenegro (December 2023–January 2024), visiting Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and several smaller municipalities, along with brief scoping in Budva. During this period, I worked with NGOs assisting newly arrived Russian relocants through legal counseling, psychosocial support, housing navigation, and informal integration activities. Staff and volunteers introduced me to Russian-speaking migrants and community intermediaries who offered insight into the offline texture of diasporic life: coworking hubs frequented by IT workers, Russian-run cafés and supplementary schools, patterns of neighborhood clustering, and widespread concerns about visibility and internal divisions.

Simultaneously, I mapped the online ecosystems, Telegram channels, VKontakte groups, WhatsApp chats, Facebook communities, and Instagram blogs, that migrants relied on for information and mutual support. This hybrid mapping clarified which digital spaces were trusted, which were rumor-prone, and how different subcommunities overlapped.

Remote Recruitment and Oral Histories

After securing IRB approval in 2025, I transitioned to remote interviewing. Recruitment flyers in Russian, Serbian, and English were distributed across the identified online platforms and NGO networks. Response patterns varied dramatically: some Telegram channels generated more than twenty inquiries, while others produced none, reflecting divergent group norms and levels of caution. Of roughly thirty initial respondents, ten completed interviews.

Eligibility required participants to (1) be Russian citizens or long-term residents of Russia; (2) have relocated to Serbia after 24 February 2022; (3) be 18+; and (4) currently reside in Serbia or have left within the last three months. Interviews were conducted primarily via Zoom, with one participant opting for WhatsApp audio. Nine interviews were in Russian and one in English; the expert interviews were conducted in Serbian. All participants consented to audio recording. All participants received an IRB-approved information sheet and provided either written e-consent or audio-recorded verbal consent; no incentives were offered. Interviews followed a trauma-informed protocol, with the option to pause, skip questions, turn video off, or withdraw at any point. Audio files, transcripts, and translations were stored on an encrypted, access-restricted drive, with identifying details removed at transcription; materials will be retained for five years per IRB policy and then securely deleted.

Data Richness and Sample Size

Although I initially planned a larger sample, the oral-history method generated remarkably dense narratives – extended migration trajectories, emotional and political reflections, and detailed accounts of bureaucratic navigation. By the sixth interview, thematic saturation was evident across core dimensions: motivations for departure, strategies for navigating Serbia's ambiguity, internal community divisions, and shifting political expression. I capped the sample at ten to preserve analytic focus and narrative depth.

Because many participants expressed that “no one has listened to us before,” I created a simple public-facing website to share anonymized excerpts and thematic patterns.¹ The site was not used for data collection; it functioned as a way to reflect participants' experiences back to them, acknowledging the emotional labor invested in the interviews.

1 See: <https://fragmentedarrials.my.canva.site/fragmented-arrivals-russian-migrants-in-serbia-after-2022>. The website presents anonymized excerpts from interviews through narrated summaries and is an ongoing project.

Expert Interviews

To contextualize migrant narratives, I also conducted interviews with two economists, Dr. Miloško Arsić and Dr. Mihail Arandarenko, selected based on their scholarship on Serbian labor markets and migration, and contacted through institutional email. Additionally, I interviewed human-rights lawyer Marko Štambuk, identified through Danas reporting on Russian migrants facing expulsion. His insights clarified the discretionary nature of Serbia's migration governance and the legal vulnerabilities migrants face.

Supplementary Online Observation Snapshot (Nov 1–20, 2025)

To complement interviews, I incorporated a focused online observation of six digital spaces I have monitored continuously since 2023: two high-traffic Telegram channels (Anti-War Serbia and Your Friend the Serb), three Russia-focused Instagram bloggers based in Serbia, and the Facebook group Welcome to Serbia. Rather than collecting isolated posts, I observed conversations across this period, tracking tone, recurring anxieties, humor, silences, conflict-avoidance, and informal authority structures. These platforms function as semi-public arenas where migrants seek bureaucratic advice, evaluate housing options, share emotional fatigue, debate integration, and navigate identity while avoiding overt political confrontation.

Translation and Reflexivity

I translated all Russian and Serbian interviews myself, treating translation as an interpretive act. I preserved culturally embedded idioms, politically charged vocabulary, and emotionally weighted phrasing; untranslatable terms appear in italics with brief glosses. Because I share linguistic and cultural fluency with participants, I adopted a reflexive approach to mitigate potential over-identification or assumptions of shared experience.

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, this sample is not statistically representative. Participants were recruited online, skewing toward urban, digitally active migrants; individuals experiencing acute repression or extreme precarity may be underrepresented. Ethical concerns also limited inquiry into transnational surveillance and security behavior. Finally, the findings reflect a particular geopolitical moment. Serbia's alignment, and thus migrants' sense of the future, may shift, requiring future research to revisit these dynamics as conditions evolve.

Findings and Analysis: Migration Motivations and Decision-Making

This subsection shows how the initial decision to leave Russia is already shaped by Serbia's strategic ambiguity and how, from the outset, this produces the conditions for suspended migration and uneven diasporisation. Rather than a simple push–pull story, participants' narratives reveal layered moral, political, emotional, and practical pressures that only crystallize into actual movement when Serbia appears as a uniquely accessible yet indeterminate corridor.

Across interviews, motivations for departure combined moral rupture, political fear, and exhaustion with more prosaic constraints such as visa regimes, income, and family obligations. What transformed these diffuse pressures into concrete exits was not a strong attraction to Serbia as an ideal destination, but its ambiguous openness: a visa and residency regime permissive enough to allow entry, yet noncommittal about long-term incorporation. Participants repeatedly stressed that they did not “choose Serbia” in a positive sense; they chose it because it remained possible when other options closed. This “last open door” logic marks the first step in suspended migration, movement undertaken under constraint, with futures left deliberately unspecified.

For some, the moral and political break with Russia was long in the making but only became actionable once Serbia emerged as a viable exit. Participant 10, a marketing professional and mother from Moscow now living in Novi Sad, described how accumulated ethical refusal finally tipped into departure when war began:

Every year things got a little heavier... another law, another humiliation, another silence. After the war began, I looked at my daughters and felt this wave of panic. I didn't want them to inherit that silence. We packed everything we could, our cats, our bicycles, and left. (Participant 10)

Here, Serbia's willingness to keep its borders open operates as an infrastructural condition rather than an ideological magnet. The border that remains open allows a strained attachment to Russia to snap but does not immediately generate a clear sense of belonging to Serbia. Exit comes first; re-rooting remains unresolved.

Long-term political foresight likewise intersected with Serbia's liminal stance. Participant 3, a 50-year-old entrepreneur, interpreted his move as the culmination of a decade of dread rather than a sudden reaction:

Since 2013 I felt the direction was dangerous... maybe irreversible. By 2021 I was convinced war was coming. When the invasion began, everything snapped into place. Serbia wasn't some political preference. It was the least antagonistic place where you could still breathe without performing... without proving anything. And then you arrive and it feels familiar, the language, the church bells, the food, a kind of warmth I hadn't felt in years. (Participant 3)

His description of “warmth without belonging” captures how strategic ambiguity is experienced as “open but noncommittal hospitality”: Serbia offers familiarity and low-friction entry while withholding clear long-term guarantees. From the perspective of diasporisation, this sets up a mode of provisional attachment – life feels livable, but not fully claimable.

Other decisions were governed less by explicit politics than by logistical pragmatism, yet they relied on the same structural conditions. Participant 8, a 22-year-old welder from Moscow now in Novi Sad, framed his choice bluntly:

Serbia was a deliberate choice, but a practical one. Close, familiar... and most of all, easy by the documents. You could do a ‘visa run,’ cross the border, walk a kilometer and come back, and it counted.² When borders tightened everywhere else, Serbia was still possible. That was it. (Participant 8)

In his account, strategic ambiguity is not an abstraction; it appears as loopholes and bureaucratic affordances that enable movement without promising settlement. Early diasporisation takes the form of corridor-making and workaround-building, rather than the construction of stable institutions or identities.

In some cases, repression inside Russia compressed timelines and rendered departure urgent rather than merely desirable. Participant 5, a 58-year-old former high school teacher from Moscow who now teaches online and works on grant-funded projects from Novi Sad, recalled when the decision ceased to be hypothetical:

On the same day, I was fired and advised leaving Russia immediately. My colleagues told me quietly that even signing a petition could put us on lists. Serbia felt familiar from past visits... a place where we could land and not collapse. But even here we live lightly... bags half-packed, always considering the next step. (Participant 5)

Human-rights lawyer Marko Štambuk characterizes this as a regime of “temporary kindness”: the legal system invites arrival but never fully anchors people. Movement is facilitated under conditions that explicitly keep futures reversible, pre-structuring a form of diasporisation that is cautious, low-visibility, and easy to unwind.

2 While systematic academic research on Serbia’s “visa-run economy” remains limited, available grey literature indicates that short exit-and-return practices (“visa runs”) are commonly used by foreign nationals to reset their legal period of stay, alongside the emergence of informal services supporting this practice. For instance, *Welcome to Serbia* (2025a) documents the prevalence of organized transport and intermediary services facilitating visa runs, while *Welcome to Serbia* (2025b) describes cross-border trips to nearby countries as a widely marketed option for non-EU residents. In addition, I observed numerous advertisements for “visa-run shuttles,” cross-border taxi services, and Russian-language agencies facilitating such trips during online ethnographic observation of migrant forums and social media groups.

Not all trajectories were framed primarily through politics. Some participants foregrounded emotional affinity or habit, but even these narratives were inseparable from Serbia's particular positioning. Participant 6, a 32-year-old man in Belgrade who now works outside his field of study, described the convergence of affect and constraint:

I had been learning Serbian as a hobby... just because I liked how it sounded. And then suddenly Serbia was the only country left that we could enter. But I think I would have chosen it anyway. It feels like a second home... because the first one burned down. (Participant 6)

Others arrived with explicit hopes of stability and long-term settlement, only to discover that the underlying ground remained "shifting." Participant 7, a 33-year-old English teacher and translator from St. Petersburg now in Novi Sad, explained:

We didn't flee in panic; we planned. We wanted a place to put down roots — climate, affordability, schools, bike lanes... all of that mattered. Serbia gave us room to think. But the longer you stay, the more you realize you're building on shifting ground. You feel welcomed, yes... but never fully held. (Participant 7)

These accounts show how strategic ambiguity converts planned migration into suspended migration: even those who intend to settle find themselves calibrating expectations against a host state that refuses to fully define the terms of belonging.

A smaller cohort explicitly treated Serbia as a stopover. Participant 4, a 30-year-old entrepreneur from Moscow who runs a small delivery/logistics business between Europe and the post-Soviet space, put it simply:

I came to Serbia already knowing it was a stopover before somewhere further. One year, maybe less. But it was the only place where I could think, regroup, and plan without fear. (Participant 4)

Taken together, the interviews reveal varied motivations, ethical refusal, fear, exhaustion, affection, calculation, but a remarkably consistent structural pathway. Serbia appears as a strategically ambiguous corridor: open where others close, permissive where others tighten, socially welcoming yet institutionally noncommittal. This is the context in which suspended migration takes shape and within which diasporisation begins not as a project of rootedness, but as a practice of keeping options open. From the moment of departure, migrants' decisions are already structured by the host state's ambiguity, setting the stage for the fragmented, provisional forms of diaspora life traced in the subsequent sections.

Integration, Belonging, and Cultural Navigation

Once in Serbia, participants did not describe integration as a linear path toward incorporation. Instead, they depicted an ongoing negotiation between interpersonal warmth, weak institutions, legal limbo, and a host country whose strategic ambiguity generates social inclusion without clear political or legal guarantees. Integration appears as a set of calibrated everyday practices through which suspended migration is lived and diasporisation is performed, often warmly but always reversibly.

Participant 1, a 32-year-old language tutor and university worker from Novosibirsk now in Novi Sad, recalled how her first months unsettled her expectations:

I didn't expect people to be that helpful. I came with no language, nothing. When my ceiling flooded, I was terrified because I had no Serbian to explain anything. But my neighbors came immediately, they were in my apartment with buckets, tools, towels, and somehow we were talking without speaking. I understood them, but I couldn't answer. It was like... I was a dog who understands commands but cannot form words back. That's how I felt for months, grateful, but mute. (Participant 1)

Her metaphor captures a key dynamic: intense interpersonal support coexists with institutional absence. As Štambuk noted, "Serbia welcomes you socially, but institutionally it keeps you suspended." The work of inclusion is delegated to neighbors, landlords, and employers rather than to structured state programs. Belonging is enacted through small acts of care, not conferred through formal incorporation.

Several participants experienced Serbia's informality as liberating compared to more tightly regulated European contexts, while recognizing that this ease was inseparable from precarity. Participant 6 contrasted his prior experiences with life in Serbia:

In Germany, if you put the wrong plastic in the wrong bin, they look at you like you're a criminal. Here... there is air to breathe. Nobody watches you. Nobody punishes you for tiny things. It's like life matters more than rules. (Participant 6)

But he also acknowledged the downside:

Because nobody watches you, nobody really helps you either. My Serbian is stuck; I can live in English and Russian. The state doesn't push you to integrate, so you float. (Participant 6)

Economist Milojko Arsić's idea of "non-integration by design" is evident here: migrants are made comfortable enough in the present, but not anchored in ways that would stabilize their long-term status. Diasporisation appears as parallel, loosely regulated lifeworlds rather than as a project of structured membership, underscoring how integration is

continuously negotiated between homeland and host-society frameworks (Weinar, Unterreiner, and Fargues 2017).

Material infrastructures reinforced this in-betweenness. Participant 3, a 50-year-old IT company owner in Belgrade, described everyday contradictions:

Everything is either too easy or too impossible. You can register a company in an hour, but then you wait weeks for a tax number. You can open a bank account in ten minutes, but it might close randomly. The city is affordable, but the infrastructure feels stuck decades ago. Serbia is perfect for today. But you can't plan tomorrow here. (Participant 3)

For Arsić, such contradictions reflect an administration oriented toward short-term gains, not long-term integration. Migrants absorb this temporality: they build present-focused routines while treating the future as contingent, deepening the suspended character of their stay.

Language emerged as the sharpest boundary between social inclusion and deeper belonging. Participant 6, again, described how this shapes his social world:

I play sports, frisbee, football, but almost always with Russians. With Serbs... I freeze. I know what to say, but I'm ashamed of my accent. So I stay in Russian. And then at the stadium, Serbs yell, 'Brother, Russia!' They hug me because of politics, not because they know me. It's warm, yes, but it's not for me. It's for an idea. (Participant 6)

Here, Serbia's strategic ambiguity, presenting itself as both "brotherly" to Russia and oriented toward the EU, materializes in interpersonal scripts. Russianness is warmly invoked as symbol, but that symbolic embrace sits uneasily with migrants' own ethical rejection of the regime. The result is a form of performed proximity that sustains diasporisation as ambivalent: migrants are visible as "Russians" yet remain cautious about claiming full belonging.

Other participants learned to navigate Serbian social codes with striking fluency. Participant 5 described this gradual adjustment:

In Serbia, you must greet your neighbors, talk to them, sit for coffee, ask about their families. You cannot hide in your apartment, that's not how things are done here. I learned this slowly. At first, I thought people were intrusive. But then I understood, this is how they show care. This is how they let you in. (Participant 5)

For her, belonging is less about legal status than about mastering a repertoire of small, embodied practices. Integration becomes an incremental, relational performance, rather than a policy outcome.

Yet even strong feelings of attachment remained fragile. Participant 8, who had begun to feel at home in Novi Sad, recounted how a single banking decision shattered her sense of security:

Serbs smile a lot. They say 'come with me, I'll help.' And you think, wow, I'm accepted. And then one day, at the bank, they tell you, 'We cannot serve Russians now.' Just like that. No explanation. You walk home thinking: so all this time... did I just imagine belonging? (Participant 8)

Institutional decisions, often opaque and unreasoned, override months of relationship-building and reveal how easily geopolitical shifts can puncture interpersonal trust.

Some opted for pragmatic detachment. Participant 9, a 40-year-old historian and tour guide in Belgrade, put it succinctly:

You can live here without Serbs. You need maybe five words of Serbian. Everything else, housing, work, food, you can do in Russian. Serbia doesn't push you toward integration. It lets you be separate. (Participant 9)

This autonomy feeds what Arandarenko calls "parallel Russias": economically functional, culturally self-sufficient enclaves whose existence is tolerated but not woven into a broader national project.

For others, integration took the form of an ethical commitment. Participant 8, who had gone through a severe depressive period before relocating, described Serbia as a space of recovery and reciprocity:

I talk to everyone, the cashier, the old man at the kiosk, the taxi driver. I learned Serbian from these conversations. I even tattooed 'С Нови Сада' on my hand because this city brought me back to life. If a place gives you a second chance, you have to meet it halfway. (Participant 8)

Such narratives exemplify everyday integration: belonging produced through accumulated acts of recognition and care, rather than through state programs.

Across these accounts, integration in Serbia appears not as arrival into a fixed category but as a performance calibrated to a strategically ambiguous environment: socially generous, institutionally thin, and vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. The forms of diasporisation that emerge, parallel enclaves, fragile attachments, and ethically motivated micro-integrations, are best understood as adaptive practices within suspended migration, not steps on a linear path toward stable incorporation.

Russian Diaspora Dynamics and Internal Divisions

Participants consistently resisted the idea that the Russian-speaking population in Serbia forms a cohesive diaspora. Instead, they described overlapping micro-worlds, filtered networks, generational and ideological splits, class-based hierarchies, held together by language but fragmented by politics, resources, and time horizons. This fragmentation is not just an echo of Russian social history; it is co-produced by a host state that offers safety without a clear political script, encouraging migrants to calibrate their proximity to one another in finely tuned ways.

For some, distance from other Russians functioned as moral positioning. Participant 1 described the “unspoken rule” she adopted with a friend:

We could talk endlessly in Russian at home. But the moment we stepped outside – onto the street, into a café – we switched to English. I didn't want to be part of the ‘Russian community’ people see here. I didn't want to be associated with people who sit in Russian cafés and don't even try to say hvala. Once I watched a Russian café owner tell a Serbian customer: ‘We don't speak Serbian.’ It felt... insulting. Serbia gave you a home, and you can't even say two words back? (Participant 1)

Yet she immediately undercut her own moral boundary:

And yet, if someone needed help, people responded. So, I judged them, but I needed them too. It was warm. I wanted distance, but I also depended on them. (Participant 1)

Her ambivalence illustrates how diaspora “performances” shift across spaces: in public, distance from “Russians” marks ethical distinction; in private, those same Russians constitute an indispensable safety net.

Visibility sharpened these tensions. Participant 2 described Russians in Belgrade as “everywhere and nowhere at once”:

You hear Russian at three tables out of five. It feels like home and not-home at the same time. The older ones – pensioners, families of officials. The new ones – IT, freelancers, teachers. And everyone has different goals. Some want to stay forever, some treat Serbia like a waiting room. We're all here, but not together. (Participant 2)

Arandarenko's observation that “most Russians here are provisional” helps explain this disjuncture. Serbia's strategic ambiguity encourages migrants to keep their options open, which in turn discourages investment in shared infrastructures and stable collective identities.

Participants also distinguished sharply between those who came before and after 2022. Participant 5 noted:

Before 2022, you had mostly older Russians here – pensioners, families connected to the Soviet-era exchanges. Now it's designers, programmers, teachers. People get divorced, fall in love, come out as queer. Serbia becomes a place where people reinvent themselves. Some take it well, some fall apart. (Participant 5)

Her description underscores how Serbia's permissive but non-institutionalized environment enables experimentation while offering little in the way of mental health or social support. Fragmentation thus runs along generational and lifestyle lines as much as along political ones.

Some respondents explicitly cast the local Russian population as a “filtered” diaspora. Participant 6 was blunt:

I don't want to be around extremists or people who repeat propaganda. Luckily, you rarely meet them here. It's a high-quality group – educated, open-minded, normal people. The Russian diaspora here is not the Russian diaspora. It's a filtered version. (Participant 6)

His phrase reveals both aspiration and exclusion: a desire to distinguish themselves from the imagined “Russia out there,” and to align with everyday Serbian cosmopolitanism while sidestepping the country's pro-Kremlin fringes.

Participants described their relationship to “the diaspora” as dynamic rather than fixed. Participant 7 recounted a shift from avoidance to reluctant solidarity:

At first I thought: ‘I must stay away. I'm not like them. I left for ethical reasons.’ But then you see new people arriving – scared, confused – and you can't ignore them. And then I get angry: people leave Russia because of the war, and then avoid any talk about politics. It's like they brought their fear with them. (Participant 7)

Her frustration echoes Štambuk's remark that “self-censorship travels with migrants,” especially when the host state offers no clear protection for political expression.

Some imagined building a more structured, politically active diaspora akin to the Belarusian exile community, but saw Serbia's geopolitical positioning as a constraint. Participant 8 observed:

We need something organized – like the Belarusians have. But Russia has too much influence here. Anything big... they will watch. And people are

scared. So it stays like this: scattered, chaotic, the same fifty faces at every event. (Participant 8)

Others offered striking metaphors for this landscape. Participant 9 described it as:

Not a community. A constellation, dots that sometimes connect, sometimes don't. You can't build a diaspora on improvisation alone. (Participant 9)

Class and professional status added further stratification. Participant 3, who runs a medium-sized IT company, described this with stark clarity:

Russians seem united, but they're not. We were taught to survive alone. The IT people live well, stable jobs, clean contracts, easy residency. Freelancers struggle. Self-employed people drown in paperwork. People lose jobs, fall into depression, want to divorce but can't because paperwork keeps them tied together. You wouldn't believe the things I've seen. People look successful but are completely lost. (Participant 3)

In a migration regime governed by discretion and informal rules, these differences are amplified: those with stable, mobile skills navigate ambiguity more easily, while others are drawn into cycles of precarity that erode trust and solidarity.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that the Russian-speaking population in Serbia does not constitute a classical diaspora with shared institutions or unified political agendas. Instead, it forms a set of partially overlapping, sometimes competing, circles of belonging, calibrated to personal ethics, political risk, socioeconomic status, and emotional endurance. In a strategically ambiguous host environment, fragmentation is not simply a failure of community-building; it is a rational survival strategy and a defining feature of diasporisation as a contingent, reversible process.

Political Identity, Activism, and Fear

Political identity among participants did not function as a fixed ideological label.³ It emerged as a practiced, cautious stance shaped by memories of repression and by the perceived ambivalence of the Serbian state. Opposition to the war in Ukraine was unanimous, but its expression was fragmented, muted, and continuously negotiated. As Arsić noted, Serbia's approach to Russian migrants resembles "conditional hospitality": authorities largely leave people alone unless they cross ill-defined political lines. This situates migrants in a regime where dissent is possible but never clearly safe.

3 By "political identity," I refer not to national belonging or partisan affiliation, but to the set of political stances, risk assessments, and participation choices migrants adopt in response to institutional conditions. This follows political-science approaches that treat political identity as practiced behavior shaped by opportunity structures, constraints, and lived experience rather than as a stable ideological label.

For many, political identity in Serbia began with disclaimers. Participant 1 described a habitual reflex:

The moment you say, 'I'm from Russia,' you have to add immediately, 'I don't support what my country is doing.' You say it so often it becomes automatic... like a reflex. And then you feel guilty anyway, even though you didn't do anything. But you have to explain yourself. Always. (Participant 1)⁴

Despite her convictions, she avoided street protests:

People say it's okay, it's allowed... but you're still a foreigner. If something happens, you're the first to be blamed. So you ask yourself: 'Is it worth it?' (Participant 1)

Her hesitation reflects a diasporic politics defined less by apathy than by risk-calculation under opacity.

Some tried to step outside national frameworks altogether. Participant 2, who had lived in several countries, framed his politics in transnational terms:

I don't want to belong to any state anymore. I'm tired of states. Putin destroyed everything... and the West completely underestimated him. I'm not going to shout in the streets here. What will it change? I'd rather do something creative — videos, stories, something that reaches people without shouting. (Participant 2)

His stance exemplifies adaptive depoliticization: a form of critical distance that shifts political energy into less visible, more individualized projects when the public arena feels unstable.

For participants who had been politically active in Russia, activism in Serbia moved into quieter repertoires. Participant 3, detained at a pro-Navalny protest before leaving, described his adjustment:

I don't go to rallies here. Not because I'm terrified... well, maybe partly. But mostly because you learn to work in the shadows. In Russia you learn that anything visible can be punished. So here I do small things, I help people with information, I support those who need legal help. It's not dramatic, but it's real work. (Participant 3)

4 These pressures are reinforced by media environments that visually and discursively frame migrants through lenses of security, control, and boundary-making in Serbia (Krstić 2024).

Migrants who had experienced strong exile politics elsewhere found Serbia's muted environment disorienting. Participant 5, who had joined large anti-war protests while temporarily in Berlin, compared the two settings:

In Berlin, everyone was on the streets. Thousands. Here... you feel like you're the only one who cares. If twenty people gather, that's already something. I'm still categorically against this war – there's no compromise – but here it feels like the volume is turned down. You protest inside your head. (Participant 5)

Several participants described explicit chilling effects connected to residency decisions. Participant 6 recounted stories circulating among acquaintances:

People said: 'Don't worry, Serbia doesn't care.' But then one guy was denied residency. Another was told he was a 'security concern.' No one explains anything. It's all... silent pressure. Serbia smiles at you, but you never know what is behind the smile. (Participant 6)

Participant 7 reached a similar conclusion after her husband was denied permanent residency on "national security" grounds despite property ownership and a clean record:

We follow all the rules, we bought property, we never did anything illegal. And then suddenly – 'national security.' They don't tell you what exactly. After that... of course we stopped going to any rallies. You understand the message immediately. (Participant 7)

Štambuk describes this pattern as "strategic opacity": the absence of clear rules about what is permissible keeps migrants perpetually cautious, folding Serbia's foreign-policy hedging into everyday risk calculations. Suspended migration thus extends into suspended political agency, where the space of the possible is simultaneously open and bounded.

Some participants redirected their energy into cultural or intellectual forms of resistance. Participant 8, unsettled by pro-Putin souvenirs and distorted historical narratives in local markets, chose counter-narration:

If you can't protest, you teach. You talk. You correct the lies. I organized discussions, invited Ukrainians, invited Serbs. It's not protest... but it's resistance. (Participant 8)

Similarly, Participant 9 used historical work as a political tool:

Russia uses history as a weapon. So I tell the real history. If you want to fight propaganda, you do it with knowledge, not slogans. (Participant 9)⁵

5 This dynamic reflects broader patterns of analogical reasoning and historical metaphor in war narratives (Kurnyshova 2023).

These strategies reflect a pattern of quiet, knowledge-based activism that aligns with the broader diasporisation process: political identity is enacted through everyday practices rather than through large collective mobilizations.

For many, however, activism felt beyond their capacity given the demands of rebuilding their lives under suspended conditions. Participant 10 summarized:

Most Russians here are just trying to survive. New language, new rules, new mentality... People say, 'Why don't they protest?' Because they're exhausted. Moving here took all their strength. There's no energy left for politics. (Participant 10)

Her own orientation shifted toward everyday ethics instead of formal politics:

Serbia taught me family, children, kindness... I became a different person. I still speak Russian, but I don't feel Russian in the same political way. My values changed. (Participant 10)

Across these narratives, political identity appears as a repertoire of adaptive strategies, disclaimers, silence, small-scale activism, cultural work, transnational creativity, or deliberate withdrawal, all calibrated to a host environment that is welcoming yet unpredictable. Strategic ambiguity structures not only what migrants can safely do, but also what feels meaningful or worth the risk. The result is a form of diasporisation marked by individualized, low-visibility engagements rather than collective mobilization: a political life shaped by suspended futures and cautious improvisation.

Precarity, Practical Barriers, and Future Uncertainty

Participants consistently narrated their lives in Serbia through a grammar of waiting, contingency, and "not knowing what comes next." Precarity here is not only economic; it is the social expression of a geopolitical strategy that keeps doors open while avoiding firm commitments. Rights exist but are unevenly applied, residency is accessible but revocable, and everyday planning is overshadowed by external events – from sanctions regimes to shifts in Serbia's alignment.

Participant 1, the young educator in Novi Sad, summarized her position with disarming clarity:

Ideally, I'd get into a PhD program... that would solve everything. But if that doesn't happen... I don't know. I can't afford Serbia without income. Going back to Russia is the last resort – I don't want to come back with the current person in power. Some people here have assimilated... others stay in the bubble. I'm somewhere in the middle, waiting... hoping something will change. (Participant 1)

Her “waiting” is less a personal indecision than a structurally induced pause. As Arsić notes, Serbia’s current growth model and migration regime are “not sustainable” in the long term; migrants like Participant 1 experience this through rent payments, contract renewals, and scholarship deadlines.

For others, return to Russia was morally foreclosed. Participant 2 put this in categorical terms:

I will never go back, not while this regime exists. I refuse to live in a country where truth is treated like a crime. So I study the culture... the language... how legalization works here. I want to do it right. But you understand that in Serbia everything depends on things you cannot influence. (Participant 2)

His outlook highlights the core vulnerability of living within a strategically ambiguous system: futures hinge on geopolitical decisions taken far above migrants’ heads.

Štambuk described this vulnerability succinctly:

Imagine living here for over a year, fully legal, working, paying taxes, and then suddenly you’re told: you have 15 days to leave. No explanation. No paper trail. Nothing.

Such discretionary power turns every bureaucratic encounter into a potential turning point, reinforcing the sense that stability is conditional.

Even those invested in long-term settlement described bureaucracy as a source of chronic anxiety. Participant 6 admitted:

I’m scared of Serbian bureaucracy. I expect it to be like Russia before digitization, paper-based, arbitrary, slow. I wish there was even one free Serbian class every week. Something. Anything. You want to build a life here, but it’s like... the state won’t meet you even halfway. (Participant 6)

He fantasized about structured retraining and language programs tied to residency, clear paths that simply do not exist in Serbia’s current model. Instead, migrants navigate what he called a “maze of improvisation,” relying on informal advice and luck.

Older migrants faced a different constellation of risks. Participant 5 described the tension between property-based residency and professional life:

European universities don’t exactly rush to hire people our age... especially in the humanities. Owning property gives you residency, yes, but then they say you must stay eleven months a year. That’s impossible for academics. Serbia invites you and restricts you at the same time. Don’t put all your hopes on one path... The ‘after’ may never come. (Participant 5)

Her warning underlines how seemingly generous residency channels become constraining for people whose careers depend on mobility.

Banking and administration provided daily reminders of discretionary governance. Participant 6 recounted:

At one bank they told me it was impossible. At another, the manager did everything in ten minutes. Same documents. Same day. It depends on the mood of the employee. Not the law. (Participant 6)

Friends and acquaintances swap detailed tips about which offices to visit, which clerks are more flexible, and when to return after a refusal. These exchanges are more than practical advice; they represent collective recognition that the system is governed by discretion rather than predictable rules, and that surviving within it requires shared, improvised knowledge.

Outside the IT sector, economic lives were often patchwork. Participant 7, with two degrees, stitched together tutoring, translation, and pet-sitting:

I like it, actually... it brings me joy. But of course, I'm scared. If Serbia suddenly joins sanctions, everything changes for us overnight. You live with that thought... every day. (Participant 7)

Her fear links personal livelihood to Serbia's foreign-policy decisions, illustrating how strategic ambiguity translates directly into everyday economic uncertainty.

Some migrants anchored themselves through tangible investments. Participant 8 spoke about renovating housing and building local reputations:

I renovated this house with my own hands... That's how you show people you're staying. You contribute something visible. (Participant 8)

Yet property and labor did not fully dispel insecurity. Land ownership eased residency in the present but offered no guarantee against future policy shifts. Migrants' embodied acts of settling coexist with an awareness that the legal ground can move.

Participant 10, reflecting on her cohort, offered a matter-of-fact prognosis:

Most people will leave. Those who stay will speak more Serbian and will stay because they chose to stay, not because it was easy. Serbia doesn't integrate you. You integrate yourself. (Participant 10)

Her view aligns with Arandarenko's expectation that the long-term cohort will be "younger, globally mobile, and selectively rooted", those who have developed the skills and emotional tolerance required to live in a permanently contingent environment.

Across these narratives, precarity emerges as the everyday face of strategic ambiguity. Serbia's hedging between Russia and the West produces a migration regime that is generous in entry, thin in guarantees, and highly sensitive to external shocks. Migrants respond by diversifying income, sharing bureaucratic know-how, investing in local ties, and keeping contingency plans alive. The result is a diaspora inhabiting a stretched present: building lives solid enough to continue yet always structured around the possibility that the conditions enabling those lives may abruptly change.

How Digital Environments Reveal Everyday Suspension

Across the online environments most frequently used by Russian migrants in Serbia – Your Friend the Serb, Welcome to Serbia, Anti-War Serbia, and a constellation of Russian-language Instagram accounts – a coherent pattern emerges. These platforms rarely host explicit discussions of why users left Russia. Instead, they document the minute, continuous labor of keeping life stable in a context where futures are uncertain and overt political talk remains peripheral. In this sense, they reveal the digital face of suspended migration: a mode of living organized around pragmatism, improvisation, and the quiet management of precarity.

Your Friend the Serb is dominated by practical exchanges. Users advise one another on new flight routes ("Direct flights have appeared to Kazakhstan"), transport details ("The cable car takes seven or eight minutes to reach the top"), or updated ski-pass prices. Threads about national holidays unfold into detailed discussions about store hours, overtime rules, and employer expectations. These conversations stay tightly focused on logistics – planning the week, organizing work rhythms, budgeting leisure – without drifting into ideological or geopolitical debate.

Food, seasons, and everyday routines act as subtle forms of acculturation. Popular posts explain how to pick chestnuts that roast well or recommend hot springs for winter weekends, complete with guidance on parking, arrival times, and child-friendly spots. These exchanges show migrants attuning themselves to Serbia's temporal rhythms – autumn produce, winter outings, weekend rituals – without framing this attunement as "integration."

Even environmental habits become shared learning. One user notes difficulty finding recycling bins in Novi Sad, prompting a chain of orienting responses. These threads combine ecological concern with local navigation and the informal politeness characteristic of the group. What stands out is not only what is said but what is absent: arguments, polarization, and heated politics.

Welcome to Serbia amplifies this pragmatic ethos. The group functions as an informal urban handbook, with users comparing supermarket prices, flagging suspicious apartment listings, and explaining lease clauses to protect newcomers from fraud. The tone remains consistently focused on how to live safely and sustainably rather than on broader debates about identity or belonging.

On Instagram, the emotional texture becomes visible. Short reels portray exhaustion, ambivalence, and the daily recalibration required in suspended migration – debating whether to stay, move on, or confront Serbian bureaucracy once more. Followers respond with recognition rather than argument: “I feel the same,” “I’m starting from zero too.” These affective exchanges make visible the emotional infrastructure that underpins practical orientation.

Anti-War Serbia, despite its explicit political identification, displays the strongest norm of depoliticized calm. Posts are community bulletin-board style: film screenings, theatre performances, children’s workshops, cultural-center events, and mental-health resources. Medical referrals and legal-aid notices appear more frequently than discussions of Russia, Ukraine, sanctions, or Serbia’s geopolitical stance. Political conviction is a shared filter for entry, but explicit politics is displaced onto safer terrain. This mirrors interview narratives: migrants maintain ethical commitments while minimizing visible political expression.

A widely circulated Instagram thread during the observation period made this dynamic explicit. It asked whether Belgrade, Tbilisi, or Yerevan are “emigrant limbos without a future.” Responses split into three interpretive blocks. One group described suspended migration as structural–social isolation, stalled residency, inability to learn the language. Another insisted limbo is psychological: “Limbo is not a place, it’s a state of mind.” A third pointed to agency: “People build businesses, start families, buy apartments.” This internal debate reflects the broader fragmentation of migrant experience: suspension understood as constraint, mindset, or challenge, but almost never as a clearly political identity.

Across all these platforms, a coherent digital portrait takes shape. Serbia appears as a place where life can indeed be organized – flights found, chestnuts roasted, recycling located, work rhythms decoded – even as larger political uncertainties remain unresolved. The social world is fragmented but quietly supportive: strangers help one another with remarkable generosity, yet these same spaces remain intentionally nonpolitical. Precarity is not denied but handled indirectly through practical heuristics about which office to visit, which bank to avoid, or when to “try again tomorrow” because a different clerk may be working.

Most striking is the systematic absence of overt political talk, even in settings explicitly named Anti-War Serbia. Migrants whose interviews are filled with political exhaustion and ethical rupture nonetheless keep their shared digital spaces focused on the tasks of immediate survival. These environments do not contradict what migrants say offline; they complete it. They show how the moral drama of departure recedes into the background

as migrants turn their energy toward the ordinary work of making life navigable under conditions where the future remains deliberately open, ambiguous, and unsettled.

Discussion

Across interviews, one refrain appeared with striking regularity: «люблю родину, но ненавижу государство» – “I love my homeland, but I hate the state.” Participants used it jokingly, yet as a moral shorthand for their political world. Its independent repetition suggests more than cultural familiarity: it functions as a portable political grammar migrants carry into Serbia. It clarifies how strategic ambiguity at the state level becomes an everyday orientation – how people learn to attach to country while distrusting state authority.⁶

For participants, *родина* named people, places, language, landscapes, and a moral world; *государство* named coercion, surveillance, and compulsory loyalty. Migration did not dissolve this distinction. Instead, Serbia reactivated it. Migrants formed affective ties to neighborhoods, markets, riversides, and seasonal rhythms, while approaching institutions with practiced caution. The split between homeland and state was not left behind – it was reproduced in a new context where the state is something to navigate rather than embrace.

Placed within this article’s conceptual architecture, the refrain reveals the kind of subjectivity that suspended migration produces. Serbia’s strategic ambiguity welcomes entry but withholds long-term commitments; rights are extendable yet revocable, residency accessible yet discretionary. Instead of destabilizing newcomers, these conditions align with sensibilities migrants refined in Russia: opaque institutions, flexible rules, and the need to invest in relationships rather than states. Ambiguity does not surprise them; it feels legible.

This suggests that the link between state-level ambiguity and migrant-level ambivalence is not one-directional. Migrants arrive habituated to separating life from state, and Serbia offers an environment where such separation is structurally encouraged. Hedging between Moscow and Brussels, discretionary “kindness,” and opaque security decisions create a political terrain where keeping the state at a distance is rational. Migrants read this terrain through prior experience: *люблю страну, но не верю государству* becomes a way of interpreting Serbia as well.

These dynamics complicate classic models of diaspora formation that assume a transfer of attachment – from homeland to hostland, authoritarian to democratic context. Rather

6 These findings contribute to recent debates in the *Journal of Regional Security* on how Russia’s war in Ukraine has reshaped regional political narratives, Russian-speaking identities abroad, and the security framing of migration in Serbia and wider Europe (Krstić 2024; Makarychev 2023; Kazharski 2023; Braghiroli 2023; Kurnyshova 2023).

than transferring attachments, participants *duplicate* the structure they developed in Russia: emotional bonds with place alongside analytic distance from state institutions. Integration is not a movement from distrust to trust, but a re-inscription of an existing split.

This replication appears across offline and online material. Interviews describe Serbia as a place where one can “breathe,” rely on neighborly solidarity, and rebuild routines – but also as a bureaucratic field defined by inconsistency, sudden reclassifications, and discretionary enforcement. Online, the pattern intensifies. Telegram channels and Instagram accounts depict Serbia as navigable terrain through shared hacks: which bank branch to avoid, which official is lenient, when to “try tomorrow.” The state appears as a series of obstacles to decode, while explicit politics – war, sanctions, geopolitical positioning – remain largely absent, even in Anti-War Serbia. Political conviction persists but is expressed cautiously and indirectly.

Suspended migration, then, is not only temporal (“we will decide later”), but epistemic: a way of knowing and inhabiting uncertainty. Futures are understood as contingent; institutions are necessary yet unreliable; mobility must be preserved even in stability. Strategic ambiguity produces what we might call practical futurity: partial, reversible investments – emotional, economic, relational – designed to be unwound if needed.

This helps explain why fragmentation and low-visibility politics are not signs of apathy, but functional adaptations to Serbia’s political ecology. Fragmented networks, parallel circles, and individualized repertoires diffuse risk in a setting where overt diaspora organization could attract pressure or entanglement with high politics. The most meaningful political acts are small, reversible, and situational: informal translation networks, discussion circles, correcting narratives during museum tours, quietly sharing bureaucratic workarounds.

Strategic ambiguity also produces uneven effects across cohorts. For highly mobile professionals, it appears enabling – easy entry, low cost of living, and preserved exit options. For older migrants or those without portable skills, it generates vulnerability: property-based residence that restricts movement, procedural insecurity, and the risk that a rule change will retroactively destabilize legal status. Yet across differences, the political disposition – attachment without trust, presence without full disclosure – remains consistent.

For security studies, these findings matter for two reasons. First, they challenge the binary framing of post-2022 Russian migrants as either security risks or natural democratic allies. The Serbian material reveals a population that is anti-war yet cautious, politically fatigued, and oriented toward minimal visibility. Their relationship to both Russia and Serbia is shaped by practiced distance, not loyalty or opposition. Second, the case illustrates how hedging states manage politically sensitive migrant populations through conditional hospitality and strategic opacity – outsourcing uncertainty to migrants them-

selves. Whether this approach is sustainable remains unclear; any geopolitical shift by Serbia would be felt first by these suspended lives.

Finally, this study points to broader research directions. Politically inflected sensibilities – such as the homeland/state split – may travel across borders rather than reset through migration. Comparative work could examine similar dynamics among other groups moving from authoritarian or hybrid regimes into hedging states. Longitudinal research is also needed: do suspended lives stabilize into institutions, dissolve through onward migration, or become permanently cyclical under shifting geopolitical alignments? The quiet infrastructures of suspended life – bureaucratic hacks, informal clinics, micro-networks of care – deserve closer study as forms of political order-making at the margins of state strategy.

In this sense, “I love my homeland, but I hate the state” becomes more than a personal sentiment. It is an interpretive lens migrants use to navigate Serbia and the international order more broadly – an order in which trust in states is rationed carefully. Strategic ambiguity does not meet blank subjects; it meets people already skilled at managing opacity. The result is a diaspora-in-formation that is neither rooted nor transient, but suspended: attached to place, detached from state, and quietly building lives in the unresolved space that Serbia maintains.

Conclusion

The experiences of post-2022 Russian migrants in Serbia show how strategic ambiguity becomes a lived condition. Entry is easy, sociability abundant, but the terms of long-term belonging remain undefined. Suspension is not indecision; it is a patterned response to a host state that keeps its geopolitical and administrative options open.

Three implications follow. First, strategic ambiguity in foreign policy cascades into migration governance, creating a regime that is permissive, discretionary, and reversible. Migrants learn to live between welcome and uncertainty. Second, diasporisation under such conditions produces overlapping micro-worlds rather than unified communities. Fragmentation is not transitional but adaptive. Third, the digital spaces migrants rely on – Telegram channels, Instagram communities – function as the informal institutions that make everyday life coherent when formal pathways are thin.

Future research should track whether suspended orientations endure or shift as Serbia recalibrates its geopolitical position, and whether similar patterns emerge in other hedging states.

Ultimately, the oft-repeated line – “I love my homeland, but I hate the state” – captures a broader condition: mistrust in states coupled with the need to keep living. In Serbia, that sensibility meets a state that refuses to define the future. The result is a Russian presence

that is neither temporary nor settled but suspended – a diaspora taking shape in the shadow of strategic ambiguity.

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- Participant 3. Interview by author with owner of a medium-sized IT company, male (50), from not specified, conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
- Participant 4. Interview by author with entrepreneur (delivery/logistics business between Europe and post-Soviet space), male (30), from Moscow, conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
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- Participant 6. Interview by author with employee in a local job (outside field of study), male (32), conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
- Participant 7. Interview by author with English teacher, translator, and pet sitter, female (33), from St. Petersburg, conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
- Participant 8. Interview by author with welder (experience in technical manufacturing; seeking employment; former chemistry student), male (22), from Moscow, conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
- Participant 9. Interview by author with teacher, historian, and tour guide, male (40), from Moscow, conducted over Zoom, August – October 2025.
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Appendix

Interview Guide for Russian Migrants

I Background and Migration Path

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself (age, occupation, background)?
When did you leave Russia, and what prompted your decision?
Why did you choose Serbia as your destination?
Did you originally intend to stay in Serbia long-term or just temporarily?

II Life in Serbia

How has your experience living in Belgrade/Novi Sad been so far?
What were the biggest challenges you faced when arriving in Serbia?
How do you make a living here? (e.g. remote work, local job, own business)
How do you interact with the local Serbian community?

III Identity, Belonging and Diaspora

Do you feel connected to a Russian community in Serbia?
Are there differences or tensions within the Russian migrant community?
How has your sense of identity changed since moving?
Do you consider Serbia a temporary place, a new home, or something in between?

IV Political Views and Public Perception

How would you describe your political stance regarding the war in Ukraine?
Have you participated in any activism, cultural events, or protests in Serbia?
How do you feel about the way Russian migrants are portrayed in the Serbian media or perceived by locals?
Have you faced discrimination or support here because of your nationality?

V Looking Ahead

What are your future plans? Do you intend to stay, move again, or return to Russia?
What do you think the Russian community in Serbia will look like in five years?
What would you like others to understand better about your experience?
Is there anything else you would like to add that the questions above did not capture?

Interview Guide for Economists

I Economic Trends and Macroeconomic Impact

From your perspective, what have been the most noticeable economic effects of Russian arrivals in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and other major cities so far?
Do you think this migration wave is strong enough to influence the local or national economy – for example, on housing prices, rent levels, or service-sector development?
In your view, have the economic contributions of Russian migrants – through taxes, business formation, or spending – been clearly measured by any existing system? If so, how?

II Government Policy and Approach

Would you say the government had a clear economic plan for responding to this influx of Russian citizens, or has it been more ad hoc?

What concrete policies or measures could Serbia develop – especially in larger cities – to capitalize on this opportunity?

Do you believe Serbia's balancing act between Russia and the EU affects its economic approach to this migration?

III Entrepreneurship and the Labor Market

We see Russians opening cafes, IT firms, beauty salons, and more. What does this entrepreneurial activity tell us about Serbia's business climate?

Are there signs that Russians intend to stay long-term and build careers here, or does it still feel like a temporary stay?

Which sectors do you think Russian migrants have already begun to fill gaps in – IT, creative industries, design, or elsewhere?

Do migrants face obstacles when formalizing their businesses or work status? If so, does this push them into the informal economy?

IV Public Perception

Is there a gap between how the public views Russian migrants and what they actually contribute to the economy? If so, does that gap have consequences for policy or the labor market?

V System Capacity & the Future

In your opinion, what are the main barriers to integrating Russians into the economy – bureaucracy, legislation, or something else?

Do you see long-term potential in this group for Serbia's economy, or do you expect their presence to remain short-term and unconnected?

If you were advising the Serbian government on economic priorities related to highly educated but politically sensitive migrants, what three key recommendations would you make?

VI Consent and Oral History Use

Would you agree to have this interview used as part of an academic oral-history project, with your name and title included (or anonymously, if you prefer)?

Is there anything I haven't asked that you think is essential for understanding the legal or human aspects of Russian migration to Serbia?

Interview Guide for Lawyers

I Personal and Professional Background

Could you tell me more about your legal career—how you came to specialize in refugee and migration law?

What kinds of cases involving migrants or asylum-seekers have you most often handled in recent years?

Has your work changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and if so, how?

II Observations on Russian Migration to Serbia

Have you represented or advised Russian citizens who arrived in Serbia after 2022? What patterns or common traits have you noticed among them?

In your view, how does this post-2022 wave differ from earlier migration waves to Serbia – in terms of legal vulnerability or political attitudes?

Many of these arrivals are neither classic refugees nor purely economic migrants. Do you think Serbia's legal framework recognizes this "in-between" category?

III Legal Framework and Institutional Gaps

Could you explain the legal process a Russian citizen must follow if they wish to secure long-term residence or legal status in Serbia?

What legal protections (if any) exist for Russians who oppose the war and fear political persecution but are not formally seeking asylum?

Serbia allows visa-free entry for Russians but lacks developed integration programs. How does this contradiction play out in practice, from a legal standpoint?

IV Human Rights and State Ambivalence

Do you perceive tension between Serbia's foreign-policy stance – official neutrality and cultural affinity with Russia – and its obligations under international migrant-protection law?

Have you encountered cases where migrants' political views (e.g., anti-war activism) led to surveillance, legal action, or denial of rights?

How do Serbian institutions typically respond to requests for help or protection from politically vulnerable Russians?

V Integration and Everyday Challenges

What are the biggest legal or bureaucratic hurdles Russians face when trying to integrate into Serbian society (e.g., housing, employment, residence registration)?

Is there a link between legal status and social integration – that is, do those with secure legal standing more often succeed in building community ties?

Many Russian entrepreneurs have opened businesses in Belgrade and Novi Sad. Have you provided legal advice to such clients, and what obstacles do they most commonly encounter?

VI Reflections and Broader Trends

Based on your work, do you think Serbia is becoming a permanent destination rather than just a transit point for Russian migrants?

What legal or institutional changes would you recommend to better address the specific needs of this new migrant population?

Do you believe the experience of the Russian diaspora in Serbia will have a lasting impact on Serbian migration policy or legal practice?

VII Consent and Oral History Use

Would you agree to have this interview used as part of an academic oral-history project, with your name and title included (or anonymized, if you prefer)?

Is there anything I haven't asked that you think is essential for understanding the legal and human aspects of Russian migration to Serbia?

ONLINE FIRST