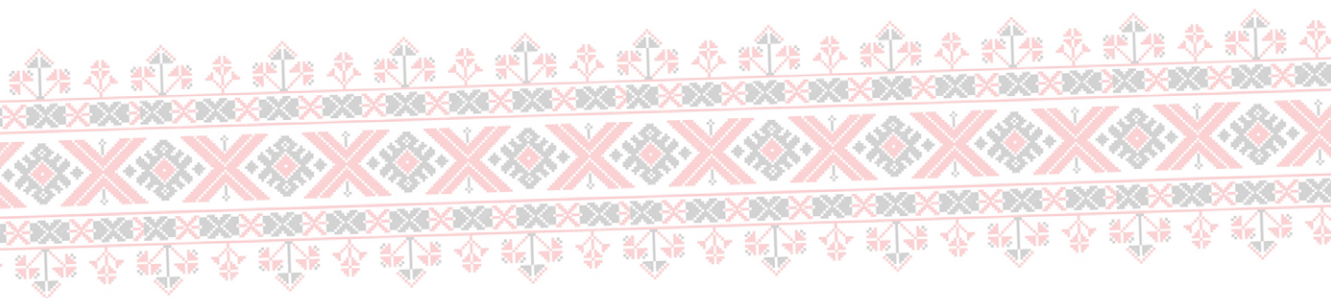




# **NON-MALIGN INFLUENCE:** WHAT DOES THE RUSSIAN COMMUNITY IN SERBIA THINK AND DO?

Srdjan Cvijic and Kristina Nikolic

February 2025



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## Abstract:

This study examines the political views of the Russian immigrant community in Serbia who relocated following the beginning of a full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. It reveals the primary reasons for leaving Russia, the willingness to engage in political and civic activism, and their adaptation to Serbian society and plans for the future. The research methodology combines a public opinion survey with in-depth structured interviews with a representative sample of Russian nationals living in Serbia. The study confirms prevailing assumptions that this group tends to hold liberal, pro-democratic views, and is largely opposed to Vladimir Putin's regime and its military aggression in Ukraine. These results counter concerns about the potential for this community to destabilize the region or serve as a vehicle for propagating Moscow's influence. A significant majority of participants report feeling safe in their new country of residence and well-adapted to the local environment, with 40.2% planning to stay in Serbia for at least the next five years. Despite the widespread opposition to Putin and the war, however, most respondents (72.8%) express limited interest in engaging more actively in political affairs. This research concludes that Russians in Serbia prioritize their safety and economic well-being, and are hesitant to jeopardize these by participating in political activities that might draw attention to their opposition to the regime in Russia.

### **Key words:**

Russian immigrants, Serbia, Political views, Political engagement, Adaptation

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## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a pivotal moment, unleashing far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences. The conflict escalation, following years of mounting tensions after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and fostered a separatist rebellion in Donbass, led to a significant increase in migration flows from both Ukraine and Russia.

In Russia, the start of the invasion was marked by swift suppression of anti-war protests, numerous arrests of opposition activists, and introduction of a plethora of repressive laws, including bans on criticizing the Russian army and referring to the invasion as a "war." In combination with sweeping Western sanctions targeting the Russian financial system, businesses, and individuals, all this created a fertile ground for mass migration from Russia.

The outflow of Russians was further boosted after September 21, 2022, when President Vladimir Putin [announced](#) a partial military mobilization in order to counter Ukraine's military successes in Kharkiv and Kherson regions.<sup>1</sup> As the authorities haphazardly dragged Russian males into the army in order to fulfil the official quota of 300,000 mobilized, thousands of eligible men and their families rushed to leave Russia. Border crossings to visa-free countries saw an unprecedented increase in traffic and airfare prices skyrocketed. As noted in the Russian [media](#): "On September 27, the traffic jam on the Russian-Georgian border was more than 20 kilometres long. Russians fleeing mobilization spend several days leaving the country."<sup>2</sup> Other [reports](#) confirmed that "the average cost of airline tickets abroad increased by 77% overnight. The number of search queries for tickets abroad more than tripled in comparison with September 19. On September 21, 90% of international tickets were booked one-way only."<sup>3</sup>

Serbia was among the visa-free countries for Russians thanks to the 2009 bilateral [Agreement](#) on the terms of mutual travel which allows Russian citizens to stay in Serbia for up to 30 days without a visa, with no limit on the number of entries.<sup>4</sup> Besides, Belgrade refused to close skies for Russian planes, preserving direct air connection to a number of Russian cities. As a result, Serbia became one of the easiest European destinations for Russians to reach, free from the visa and logistic complications or strict border controls. This convenient access has led to a major influx of Russian nationals into Serbia, who now form one of the largest minority communities in the country.

This research aims to explore the political views of the Russian community in Serbia. The goal is to understand whether these individuals may have any impact on the security and political landscape of the hosting country and determine whether they could potentially act as a catalyst for democratic changes in Russia or are more focused on preserving their economic well-being, choosing to remain largely silent and inactive on either Russia's or Serbia's ongoing policies. In addition, the research seeks to examine the extent of the Russians' integration into Serbian society, their attitudes toward the political situation in Serbia, and their future intentions regarding either returning to Russia or continuing to live in Serbia.



## Coca-Cola or war refugees?

During a September 2024 [stand-up comedy show](#) in Belgrade, engaging with a Russian from the crowd, a Romanian comic Victor Pătrășcan used the term “Coca Cola refugees” to describe Russians who emigrated in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for, as he sarcastically put it, “moral reasons”.<sup>5</sup> The line of the joke is that Russian citizens didn’t come to Serbia the first time when Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014, or Georgia in 2008 and Syria in 2015, but that they fled Russia only after 2022, because “when you cannot order stuff on Amazon, then the morals start kicking in”. Is this a fair representation of the *zeitgeist* amongst the Russian expat community in Serbia or are they to Putin’s regime what the Russian émigrés in Paris were to the Bolsheviks seizing power in Russia in 1917, an expat enclave and a centre for free Russian cultural and intellectual life in exile? What do they really think about the war, Putin, and their hosting country?

The first available data on Russians’ political views in Serbia came from the [exit polls](#) conducted by the association of volunteers “Vote Abroad” (*Голосуй за рубежом!*) during the Russian presidential election on March 17, 2024, as well as the official results published by the Russian Central Election Commission.<sup>6</sup> Compared with other countries where Russian diaspora voted, Putin received the least votes in Serbia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, and the polling station in Warsaw, Poland. According to the “Vote Abroad” exit poll, only 3% voted for Putin in Montenegro, Warsaw, and Serbia, and 2% in the Netherlands. According to the official results of the Central Election Commission, Putin got the fewest votes in Montenegro (8%) and Serbia (11%).<sup>1</sup> With 4,724 votes counted, the Serbian polling station was by far the largest of the four. For the sake of comparison, 1,649 voted in the Netherlands, 1,498 in Montenegro and 890 in Warsaw. In Serbia, most people (67%) voted for Vladislav Davankov, Deputy Chair of the Russian State Duma from the New People’s Party, the only one in the Duma to abstain in the vote on the recognition of Donetsk and Lugansk separatist republics in February 2022. According to the [observers](#), another approximately 5,000 persons waited in vain outside of the polling station in Belgrade (the Russian School in Belgrade) and were unable to vote in time.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By rule, the results of the Central Election Commission gave Putin more votes than collected through an independent exit poll. The discrepancy in most polling stations in the World was higher than in Montenegro and Serbia.

## Two Russias in Serbia

The significant influx of Russian immigrants to Serbia has caused vivid discussions in domestic and international academia on whether they present a threat or a benefit for Serbian society. According to the [report](#),<sup>8</sup> Russian immigration to Serbia brings several potential benefits. The influx of qualified Russian specialists, particularly in IT, could help turn Belgrade into a regional IT hub. Besides, most Russian migrants are young and educated families with children, which could improve Serbia's poor demography and massive brain drain. On the other hand, the same source states that the arrival of relatively wealthy Russians could boost the inflation, especially the real estate prices in the largest cities. There are also concerns over the emergence of a "parallel society", where Russian immigrants do not integrate into Serbian ordinary life, sticking to their own cafes, schools, hair and beauty salons in Serbia.<sup>9</sup>

The political impact of the Russian immigrants also raises many questions. Some believe that the influx of anti-Putin Russians may sway Serbian public opinion against the Kremlin. Such expectations are supported by the Russian pro-government media, which portray Russian immigrants as a potential threat to the Serbian state. They highlight concerns about "liberal-minded relocators" engaging in activities deemed harmful to the Serbian national security and attracting the attention of the Serbian intelligence services this way, by [emphasizing](#) that "the resettlers who involve themselves in Serbia's internal affairs are often the same individuals actively organizing anti-Russian actions within the country."<sup>10</sup>

Alongside these economic, social and political aspects of Russian arrivals, the Government of the Republic of Serbia submitted new [amendments](#) to the Law on Citizenship on May 5, 2023.<sup>11</sup> These amendments aimed to grant immigrants and asylum seekers the opportunity to obtain Serbian citizenship after just one year of residence, as opposed to the previous requirement of five years of temporary residence. This would have significantly accelerated and simplified the process for foreign nationals, including those from Russia.

However, the proposal encountered significant opposition from the European Union. As [confirmed](#) by a European Commission official at the time, "the Commission expressed its concerns that the envisaged changes to the Serbian citizenship law could present public policy or security risks for the EU, given that Serbian citizens enjoy visa-free access to the EU."<sup>12</sup> After intense consultations with Brussels, the Serbian Government withdrew the proposed changes on October 12, 2023, which was acknowledged in the 2023 European Commission Annual Progress [Report](#) on Serbia.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the amendments were not adopted, this underscored the Serbian Government's commitment to maintaining a more flexible and welcoming migration policy, reflecting a broader openness to foreigners, including Russian nationals.

This dovetailed with the fears that after the start of the war in Ukraine, Serbia has become a fertile ground for the Russian state presence and the spread of the Russian war propaganda. Serbia's refusal to join the EU sanctions against Russia allowed it to remain a safe destination for Russian diplomats expelled or blacklisted by the EU member states for espionage. The recent [report](#) indicates that at least three Russian diplomats, among hundreds, declared *persona non grata* in the EU member states, have been accredited in Serbia, contributing to an increase in Russian diplomatic presence in the country from 54 in March 2022 to 62 in March 2023.<sup>14</sup>

The enhanced diplomatic presence is complemented by the rising activities of Russian state-funded media outlets, such as Sputnik and RT (Russia Today) in Serbia. While Sputnik opened its Serbian branch office in 2014, the [RT Balkan](#) multimedia portal in Serbian language was launched on 15 November 2022 and the RT TV channel at the end of 2024 via the state-owned cable television provider Telekom. At the launch of the portal back in 2022, RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan stated that "Probably, nowhere in the world have we been so awaited as here. And I want to address dear Serbs in their language: *Braćo, gledajte RT (Brothers, watch RT)*."<sup>15</sup> This came soon after the EU decided on 2 March 2022 to suspend the broadcasting activities of RT and Sputnik in all member states.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Serbia became a key hub for their operations in the Western Balkans, with infrastructure aimed at reaching Serbian-speaking audiences and circumventing the EU's broadcasting ban.

Moreover, there were also reports that the notorious Wagner mercenary's group made attempts to recruit and train troops in Serbia.<sup>17</sup> Serbian authorities dismissed such allegations, emphasizing that participation in the wars of foreign countries<sup>18</sup> or recruiting and training activities for that are [illegal](#) in Serbia.<sup>19</sup> This though doesn't prevent a number of Serbian volunteers fighting on the Russian side in Ukraine.

Serbia has also been a site for various pro-invasion rallies displaying symbols and slogans in support of Vladimir Putin and Russia's actions in Ukraine. One of them was held on March 2022 with "some 4,000 people who joined the march after gathering in front of the monument to Russian Tsar Nicholas II in central Belgrade, where they played Russian and Serbian anthems and hailed the two countries as brethren nations."<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, on December 6 and 7, 2024, the [event](#) "Days of Darya Dugina" was hosted in Belgrade, honouring the daughter of Aleksander Dugin, a prominent Russian far-right political philosopher.<sup>21</sup> As the Russian [sources](#) report, "the event was opened by Russian philosopher and political scientist Alexander Dugin, addressing the audience via video link. He noted that he was especially glad that the event in the memory of his deceased daughter was taking place in Serbia."<sup>22</sup> The event agenda consisted of panel discussion "Theory of Europe - Multipolar Vision of Darya Dugina", youth [discussion](#) "For a revolution of the spirit: the battle between heroism and nothingness"<sup>23</sup>, as well as speeches, cultural programs and concerts centred on Dugina's assassination and ideological legacy, framing her as a martyr in the struggle against perceived Western globalism.<sup>24</sup>

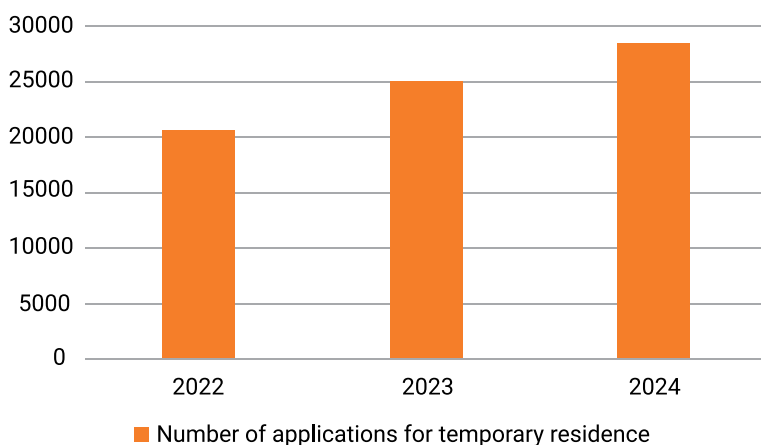
Another recent event confirming Serbia's role as fertile ground for anti-West narratives and Russian soft power projections was held in the local town of Čačak on November 2 and 3, 2024 under the name "The International Anti-Fascist Conference of Cossack and Public Anti-Fascist Organizations of European Countries" and the slogan "No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten."<sup>25</sup> It was initiated by the [Union of Cossacks of the Don](#) and [International Union of Anti-Fascists](#), organized by the [Society of Serbian-Russian-Belarusian Friendship, All-Serbian Union of Cossacks](#) and [Russian Cultural Centre](#), with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.<sup>26</sup> The manifestation was dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the liberation of European countries from fascism in 1944–1945, the role of Cossacks in anti-fascist struggle, including the discussion on the legalization of Ukrainian organization "Azov" in European countries and conclusions that "the ruling regimes of the West, by supporting Bandera and Ukraine with weapons and money, are contributing to the revival of Nazism."<sup>27</sup>

## How many Russians live in Serbia?

According to the most recent estimates, more than 650,000 people have left Russia since the start of the war in Ukraine till mid-2024, relocating mainly to Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Turkey, and Germany.<sup>28</sup> One of the main challenges in conducting this research was to determine the exact number of Russian immigrants in Serbia. The visa-free regime between the two countries allows Russian residents to apply for a temporary residence permit in Serbia immediately upon arrival or electronically before arrival in case they meet any of the 14 legal grounds for lodging an application, as stated in the Serbian [Law on Foreigners](#).<sup>29</sup>

According to the official data provided by the Serbian Border Police Administration at the request of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), in the period from February 24, 2022, until December 31, 2024, there were 73,197 applications for temporary residence permit in Serbia filed by Russian immigrants, among which 67,236 permits were granted (more than 90%). Our own survey and the following interviews confirmed that 64% of respondents had applied for temporary residence permit, while 29.7% had not, but plan to do so, and 6.3% did not apply. The main grounds stated as the legal basis for receiving the temporary residence in Serbia are: 1) getting a job from an employer registered in Serbia; 2) registering own company in Serbia; and 3) family reunification when one of the partners already holds the temporary residence permit.

During the first two years of the war, the number of Russian requests was on the rise, until the beginning of 2024, when a noticeable decrease was recorded. There was also a relatively high number of rejected requests in 2024: 1,465 versus 245 in the same period of 2023 and 309 in 2022, which may indicate a tightening of the criteria for temporary residence approval in Serbia. Given that the Serbian government has refused to prolong the residence permit of several Russians critical of the Putin regime [on “security grounds”](#) forcing some of them to leave the country<sup>30</sup>, there are indications that the tightening of the criteria may have been politically motivated, although official Belgrade [refuses](#) to give meaningful justification for such rejections.<sup>31</sup>

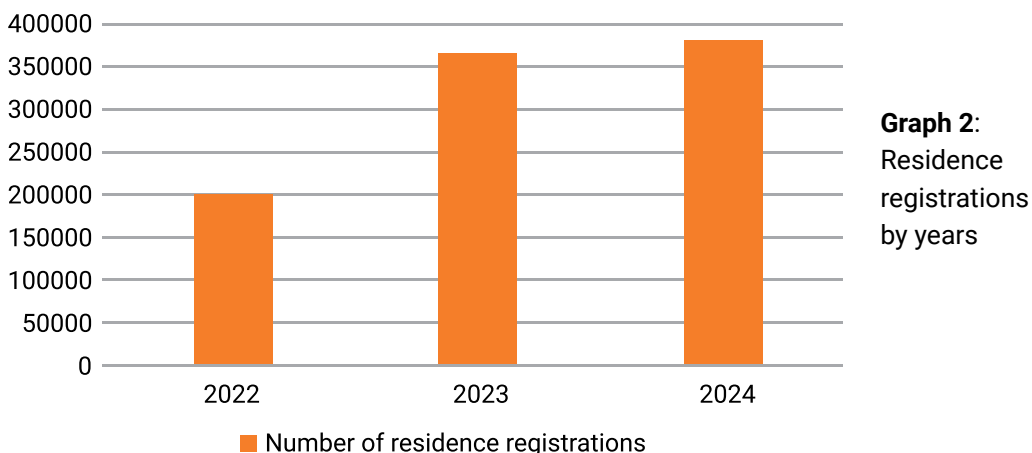


**Graph 1:**  
Applications for temporary residence by year

The figure of 67,236 indicates the number of Russian nationals granted [the right to reside](#) in Serbia for three years from the approval date. This temporary residence can be extended for another three years, depending on the eligibility. The number of such extensions is not limited.<sup>32</sup> Those Russians, who already hold a temporary residence permit, are entitled to apply for a permanent residence permit after living in Serbia for three years in a row, with allowances for multiple absences (up to ten months in total or six months in a single absence).<sup>33</sup>

However, the number of the residency permit applications does not include those Russians, who take advantage of the visa-free regime between Russia and Serbia by engaging in the so-called *visa runs*, i.e., leave and re-enter the Serbian territory after 30 days of continuous stay. A significant number of Russians still stick to this method of legalization, as it doesn't require much time or effort: neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina also has the visa-free regime with Russia, and its border is within a two-hours' drive from the major Serbian cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad. Still, these individuals, as any foreigners visiting Serbia, are required to undergo the "residence registration", which has to be completed at a local police station within 24 hours after arrival.<sup>34</sup>

According to the Serbian Border Police Administration, the total number of such registrations of Russian citizens from February 24, 2022, to December 31, 2024, amounts to 948,934, peaking in 2024.



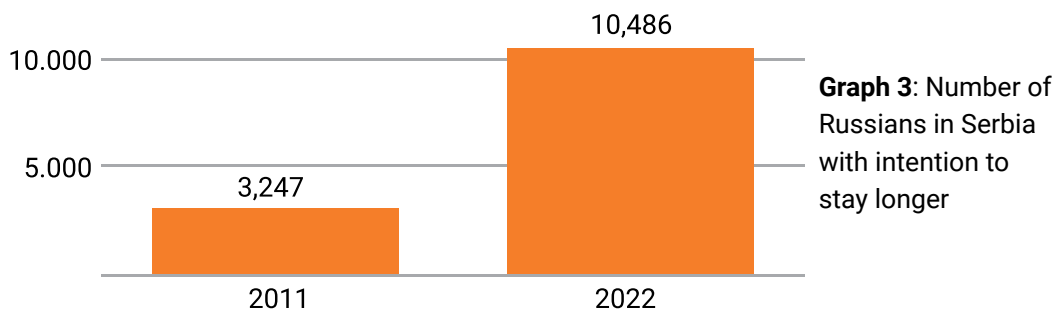
However, the number of registrations should not be treated as the number of Russians arriving in Serbia after the start of the invasion, as the registration process is repeated each time an individual re-enters the country. It includes all those who crossed the border of the Republic of Serbia, starting with those who stayed for a short term or in transit, up to those who plan a temporary stay and thus re-enter the country and reregister every 30 days. On the other hand, despite being formally 'mandatory', the enforcement of the requirement is very lax, and many Russians bother to register only in those months, when they need to deal with the Serbian authorities. According to the sources in the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs, this total number of such registrations may be considered merely a "gross amount" as multiple arrivals of the same individuals are counted as separate entries thus inflating the overall figure.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, based on the data on the tourist traffic published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and generated by the Central Information System in Hospitality and Tourism ([eTourist](#)), since the start of the invasion in February 2022, there has been a significant increase in the number of stays of Russian tourists at Serbian hotels, Airbnb apartments and other tourist booking options, from 6,436 in [February](#)<sup>36</sup> to 8,056 in [March](#) 2022.<sup>37</sup> The next important increase was in the wake of the announcement of the partial mobilization in Russia in September 2022, from 9,837 in [September](#)<sup>38</sup> to 18,447 [October](#) 2022.<sup>39</sup>

After that, the number of stays of Russian tourists stabilized, though at the much higher level than before the invasion of Ukraine, and far ahead of the tourist inflow from other countries, clearly indicating that theirs is an extraordinary migration not simply tourism. For instance, the number of tourists overnight stays of Russians in April 2023 amounted to 57,604, which is several times more than tourists from any other country, including the neighbouring ones to Serbia, in the same month.<sup>2</sup>

The median of monthly tourist arrivals from Russia to Serbia in the period from February 2022 till October 2024 is 14,356.5. Still, it does not indicate the average number of Russians coming to Serbia since one tourist can arrive more than once to Serbia, each time being registered.

Therefore, the exact number of Russians living in the Republic of Serbia is difficult to determine, especially if this number has been subject to significant variations in the past. For example, in just 11 years between the last two population censuses in Serbia in [2011](#)<sup>40</sup> and [2022](#),<sup>41</sup> the number of Russian citizens who intend to stay in the Republic of Serbia for a while has tripled.



Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Although we currently do not have precise data on the number of Russian citizens living in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, our estimate based on the data provided above is that the figure of Russians currently living in the country is approximately from 80,000 to 110,000.

<sup>2</sup> Turkey 39,734, Bosnia and Hercegovina 27,461, North Macedonia 27,051, China 25,600, Germany 21,686, Croatia 18,801, Slovenia 17,826, Bulgaria 17,745, Montenegro 17,395, Romania 15,594, Greece 14,256, Italy 9,861, Hungary 9,385, USA 8,876, Austria, 8,858, Switzerland 8,235, France 7,028, Poland 5,371. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Tourist traffic - April 2023," published on May 31, 2023, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G20231119.pdf>.

# What do Russians think, feel and intend in their new home?

## Methodology

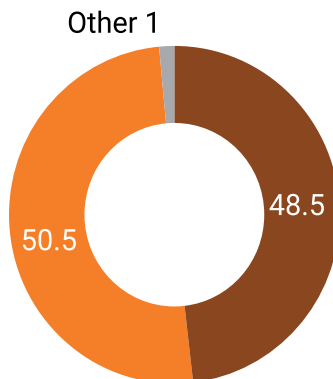
This research was conducted with the support of TMG Insights, part of the KANTAR international market research company, operating in Serbia and Montenegro. The TMG Insights provided support in the preparation and implementation of the two-stage project, with Quantitative Survey executed first, providing guidance for the Qualitative interviews.

The primary objective of this research was to collect data and gain key insights into the political views, attitudes, challenges, and future of Russian immigrants in Serbia who arrived following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining an online quantitative survey with six structured online interviews. The survey was conducted with a sample of 300 respondents aged 18 and older, between September 4 and October 3, 2024. The collected data were weighted by gender to ensure representativeness.

The results of the quantitative survey served as a foundation for developing semi-structured guidelines for qualitative interviews with selected participants from the survey pool. Candidate recruitment for the interviews was conducted through TMG Insights’ recruiter network using methods such as random walk, referrals, snowballing, and the collection of phone contacts. Invitations were provided in both Russian and English, including incentives to encourage participation. The interviews were conducted via *Zoom* between November 4 and 7, 2024, and were recorded, with transcripts provided in both Russian and English, ensuring strict anonymity for all participants.

## Sample demography

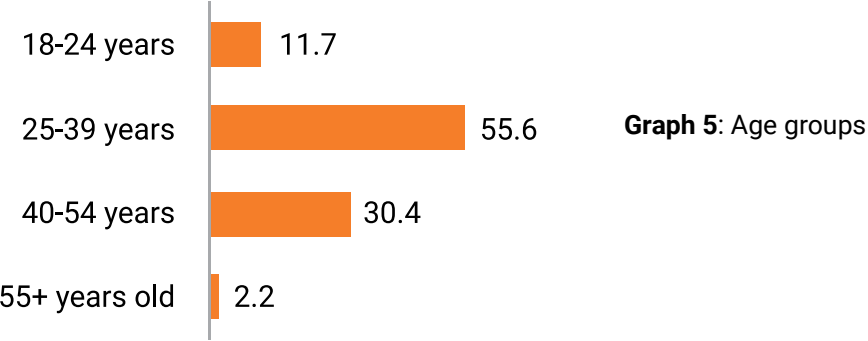
In terms of gender representation, 48.5% of survey participants were men, and 50.5% were women.



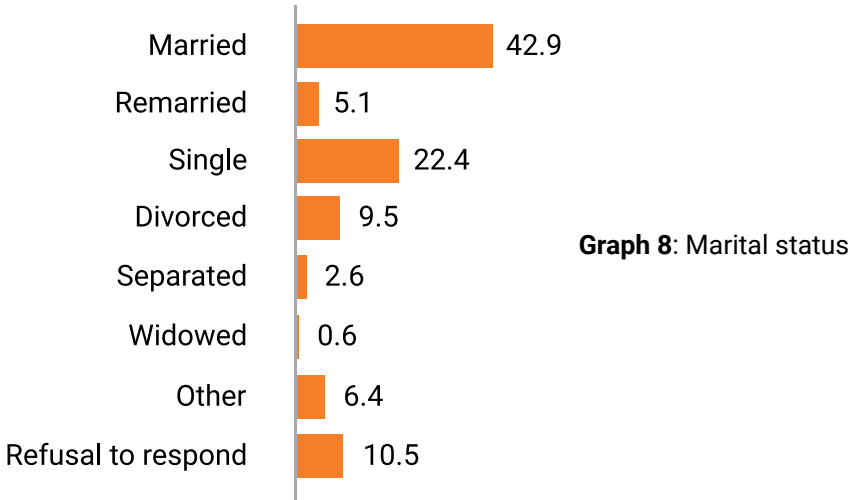
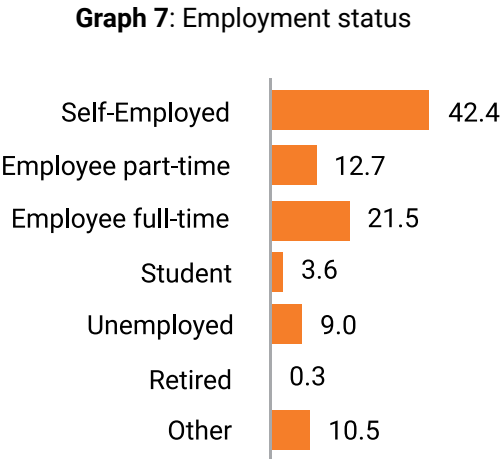
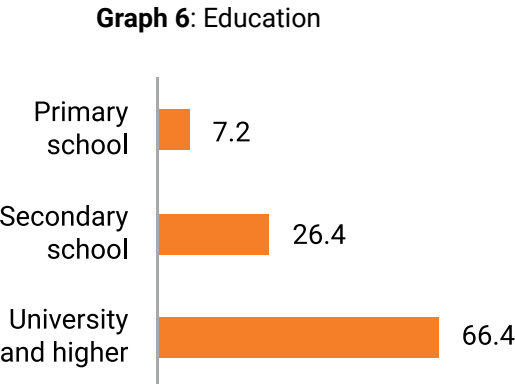
**Graph 4:** Gender



The majority of our respondents are between the ages of 25 and 39 (55.6%), while the least represented age group is 55 and older (2.2%).

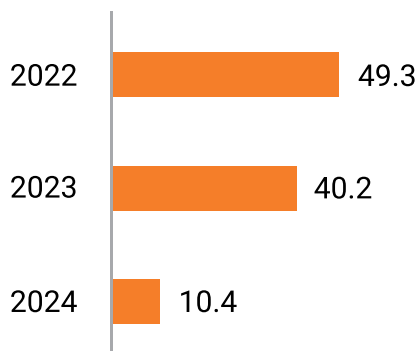


Most participants have higher education (66.4%), are self-employed (42.4%) and married (42.9%).

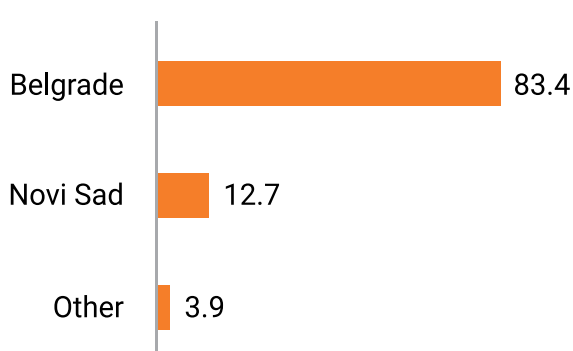


Additionally, the majority of survey participants arrived to Serbia in 2022 (49.3%) and most of Russians that have come after the start of invasion are living currently in Belgrade (83.4%).

**Graph 9: Arrival to Serbia**



**Graph 10: Current residing place**



## | Arrival and living in Serbia

One of the objectives of this research was to understand the Russian immigrants' reasons for coming to Serbia, their sense of safety in the country, and willingness to integrate in Serbian society.

The survey showed that security is the most important reason for leaving Russia and coming to Serbia (57.4%), followed by political reasons (47.7%). Still, the economic reasons also appear to be quite important with 42% of responses (multiple answers were allowed).

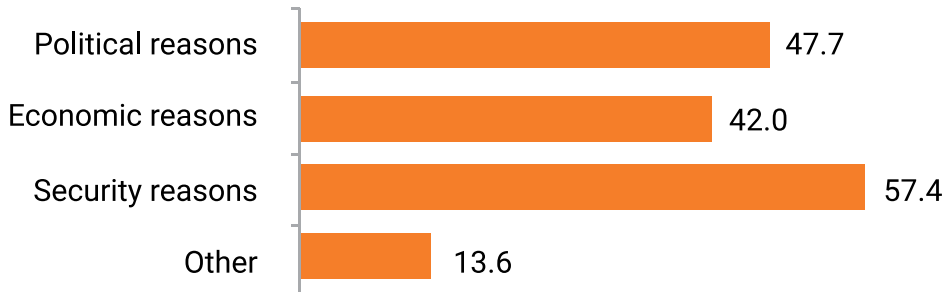
The interviews also revealed security concerns as the prevailing reason for leaving Russia:

“The mobilization and the war situation became a strong motivational push. It wasn't just a departure. It was more like an evacuation.”  
(Male, 40–49 years old)

“Well, there was such a situation that everyone was intimidated. Everyone began to be afraid. If you are even a little afraid, your relatives begin to be very afraid. They're pushing you, let's hurry, hurry.” (Male, 20–29 years old)

**Graph 11:** Reasons for leaving Russia

**What would you single out as the key reason for leaving Russia and coming to Serbia? MULTIPLE ANSWERS (In %)**



In a question allowing multiple answers, top reasons for choosing Serbia over other countries are favourable visa policy for Russian citizens (63.5%), then language and cultural similarity (57.6%). Only 18.7% respondents state political friendship between Serbia and Russia as a reason to come to Serbia. Favourable visa policy was more relevant for males and employed, while positive attitude towards Russians was more important among younger and more educated.

**Graph 12:** Reasons for choosing Serbia over other countries

**Which of the following factors influenced you to choose to come to Serbia over other countries? (In %)**



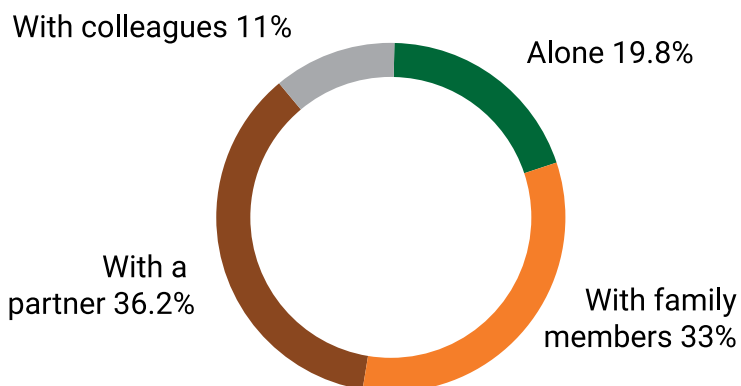
During interview phase, participants described cultural similarities between the two countries as crucial for choosing Serbia over other countries:

“So, overall, we knew where we were going. But the culture is probably close to ours, the mentality is similar. That played a key role.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

More than a third came with a partner (36.2%) and a third with family members (33%).

**Graph 13: Who did you come to Serbia with?**

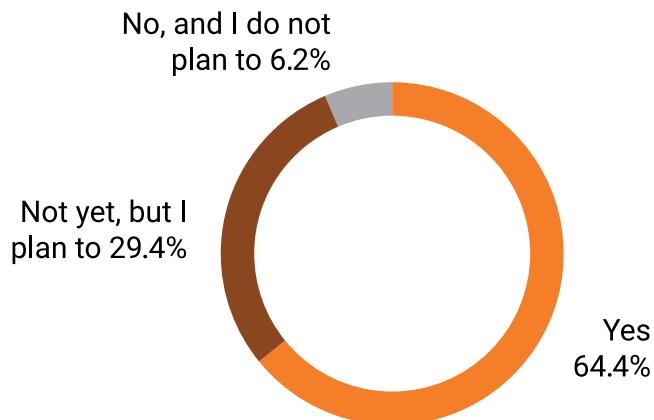
**Who did you to come to Serbia with?**



The majority of respondents applied for temporary residence in Serbia (64.4%) and most of them obtained it without major difficulties.

**Graph 14: Temporary residence permit in Serbia**

**Have you applied for temporary residence in Serbia?**



As confirmed by the interview respondents:

“Each case is different, so it’s not the same for everyone, but mostly within a year, everyone gets a residence permit. Maybe even less, in six to nine months.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

“Among my close acquaintances and friends, everyone has a residence permit. Mostly it’s either the husbands who work, or they work themselves. Mostly it’s all through work.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

The vast majority of Russian immigrants feels safe in Serbia (96.5%). Among the small minority (3.5%) who reported feeling unsafe, concerns were linked to perceived threats or activities by Russian or Serbian intelligence services.

This was also confirmed during the interviews, where the participants stated that:

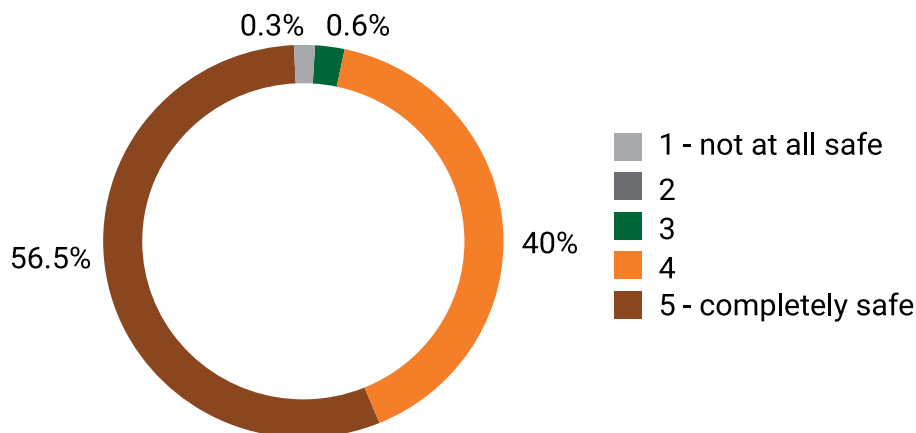
“I even feel safer here than I did back home. I’m comfortable letting my child go out alone.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

“It’s safe here, also walking at night on the streets, even in some places where there are no streetlights, well, it’s still not scary.” (Male, 30–35 years old)

When it comes to adapting to the life in Serbia, the majority of Russian immigrants feel well-adapted (81.5%), while only 19.4% express concerns about integrating into Serbian society. Also, 73.7% respondents said that they started learning Serbian language and 76.7% have Serbian friends or acquaintances.

**Graph 15:** Sense of safety in Serbia

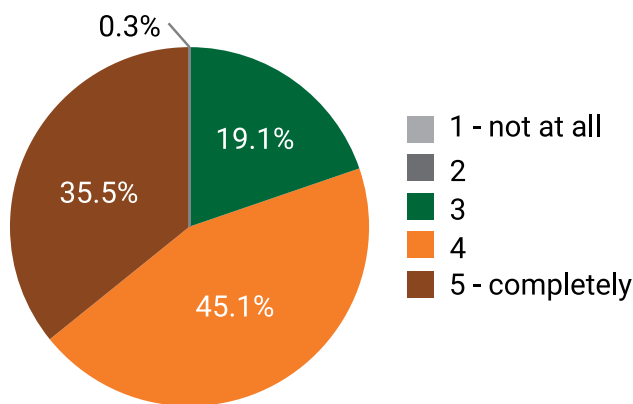
**On a scale of 1 to 5, please express your sense of safety living in Serbia**



During the interviews, the majority noted that they easily meet new Russian migrants through mutual acquaintances, at entertainment events, and concerts. They maintain contact with Serbs, though it is less frequent, including landlords, neighbours, friends, colleagues, clients, teachers, and educators of their children, parents of Serbian friends, and classmates. As emphasized by one of interviewees:

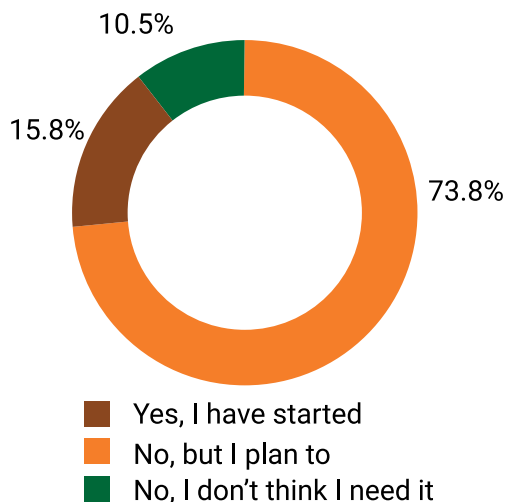
**“We mostly interact with Russians, like most expats. So, mostly it’s either people I work with, people I knew before moving, or people we’ve met at various events.”** (Male, 30–39 years old)

**Graph 16: Adaptation to Serbian life**  
**On a scale of 1 to 5, please express how well you have adapted to life in Serbia**



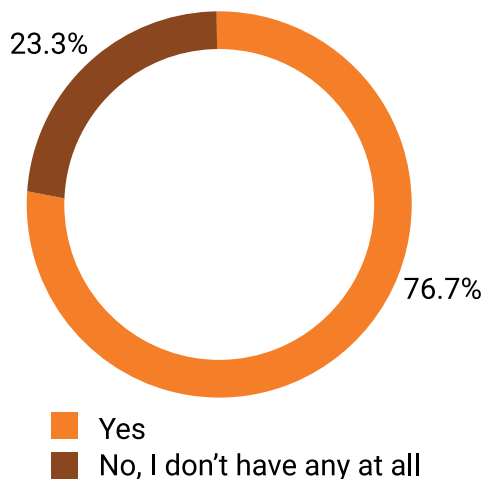
**Graph 17: Learning the Serbian language**

**Have you started learning the Serbian language after arriving in Serbia?**



**Graph 18: Having Serbian friends or acquaintances**

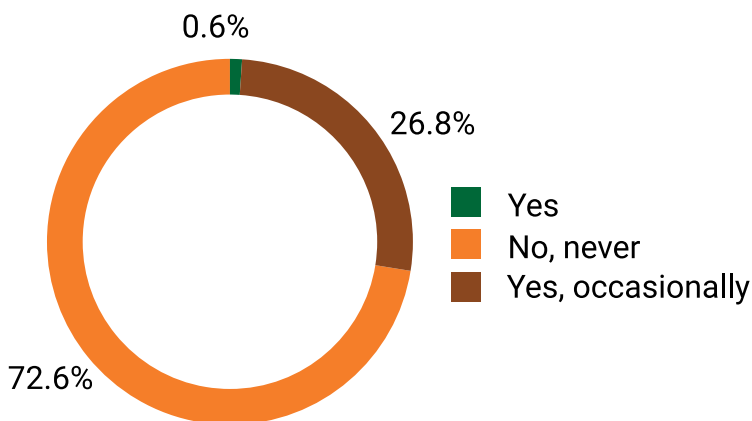
**Do you have Serbian friends or acquaintances who you spend your time with?**



The majority haven't experienced inconveniences in dealing with Serbian citizens after arrival (72.6%). Only around a quarter among those who have experienced mentioned negative attitudes of Serbian citizens, say that Russian immigrants are driving up real estate prices (29%).

**Graph 19:** Negative attitudes of Serbian people

**After your arrival, did you experience any kind of inconvenience or negative attitude from Serbian citizens?**



**Graph 20:** Inconveniences in Serbia (among respondents who experienced them)

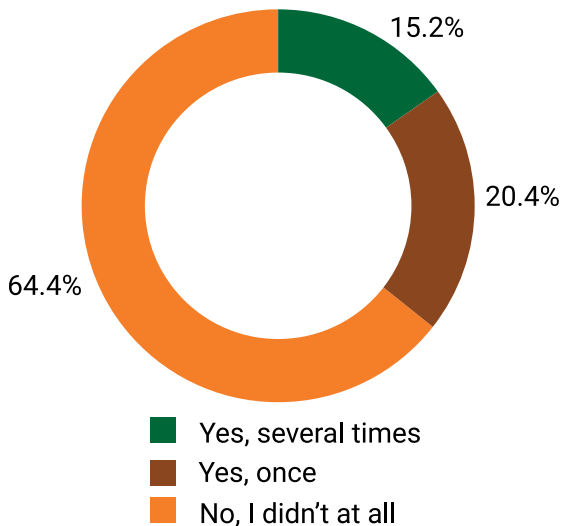
**If there were inconveniences or negative attitudes (in %)  
SOME SERBIAN CITIZENS EXPRESSED OPINION THAT RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS ARE...**



## | Going back to Russia

Our survey has also explored whether respondents intend to return to Russia and under what conditions they would consider doing so. The results show that the majority haven't been to Russia since their arrival to Serbia (64.4%), mainly due to feeling unsafe there (50.3%) or travel barriers – ticket prices and other travel costs (42.7%).

### Have you been going back (shortly visiting) Russia since your arrival in Serbia?



**Graph 21:** Going back to Russia since arrival

### Graph 22: Reasons for not visiting Russia

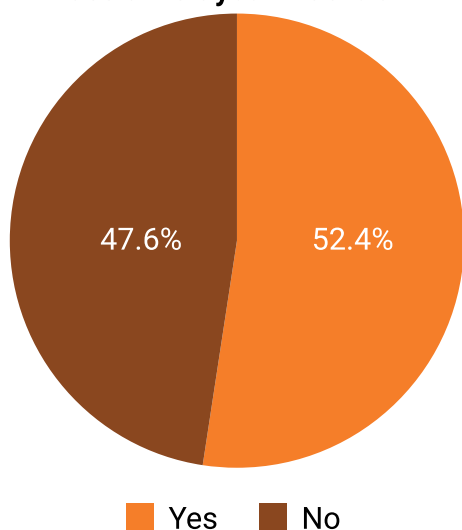
#### Why have you not been going back (shortly visiting) Russia since your arrival in Serbia? MULTIPLE ANSWERS





On the other hand, half of respondents said that sometimes they are visited by friends and family members from Russia (52.4%).

### Do your family and friends from Russia visit you in Serbia?



Graph 23: Visits from Russia

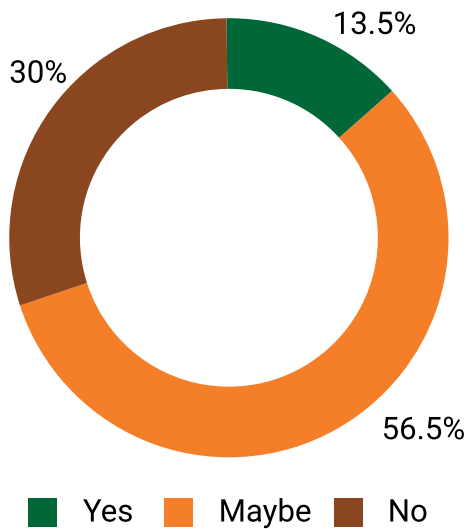
In terms of plans for the future, the majority are uncertain about moving back to Russia (56.5%). Most would move back only if the war in Ukraine ends (56.9%), while 38.5% said they would go back in case of the change of the current political power in Moscow.

Delving deeper into this topic during the interviews, it was confirmed that returning to Russia would only be considered under exceptional circumstances, such as a family emergency, the lack of means to sustain themselves, or deportation from Serbia. Additionally, as the majority feel well integrated with the Serbian society, they would consider returning only if drastic socio-political changes occur in Russia. Some noted that returning to Russia is only possible if very profound democratic change happens:

“The changes would need to be quite drastic in Russia for it to become a desirable country for me again.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

“Willingly, no. I don’t want to. If there are life circumstances beyond my control, I will return. I can’t state that I’ll never go back no matter what. It’s a matter of circumstances.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

## Are you planning to move back to Russia?



**Graph 24:** Going back to Russia in the future

## Graph 25: Conditions for going back

### Under what conditions would you move back to Russia? MULTIPLE ANSWERS (In %)



The survey also intended to find out if Serbia serves as a kind of “transit” country for Russian immigrants on the way to richer countries in Western Europe. The results revealed that 40.2% of the Russian diaspora in Serbia envision staying in the country over the next five years, while only 12.2% express a preference for continuing their lives in the European Union. Regarding obtaining Serbian citizenship in the future, only 9% dismiss this possibility entirely.

When it comes to Serbian citizenship, the interviews showed that the participants are still not sure if they would have to give up their Russian citizenship to get a Serbian one. Still, they consider the option of obtaining Serbian citizenship in the future. Some stated that they were not ready to renounce Russian citizenship and would obtain Serbian citizenship only if they could have dual citizenship:

“I don’t know yet. The difficulty is that you must renounce your citizenship, so I really need to think about it carefully.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

“It would be nice to have dual citizenship, like in Israel, for example. I don’t know, I wouldn’t like to give up my own.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

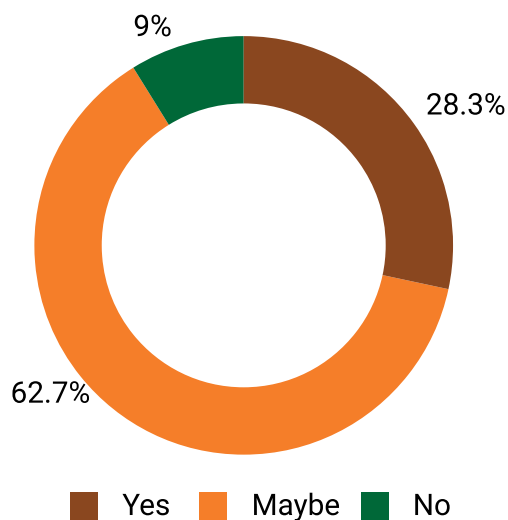
**Graph 26:** Plans for the next five years

**In the next five years where do you see yourself most likely: back to Russia, EU or other countries, or stay in Serbia? (In %)**



**Graph 27:** Obtaining Serbian citizenship

**Do you plan to get Serbian citizenship?**



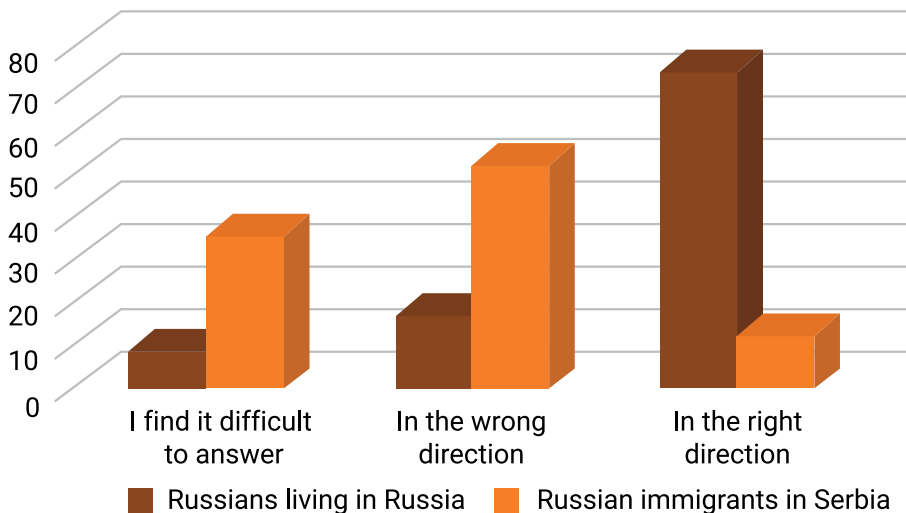
## Political attitudes towards Russian politics: Russians in Serbia vs. Russians in Russia<sup>3</sup>

In this part of the survey, the objective was to determine the attitudes of Russian immigrants in Serbia towards the political situation in Russia and compare it to the political attitudes of those Russians who stayed in their homeland.

The comparison reveals that the political outlook of the Russian diaspora in Serbia is almost the opposite to the one of Russian society back in the country. Responding to the question about Russia's current political direction, the results of the Levada [poll](#) from June 2024 show that 74% of Russians living in Russia thought that things in their country were going in the right direction,<sup>42</sup> whereas only 12.5% of those in Serbia shared their opinion. Answering the same question, 51.9% of Russians in Serbia believe things in Russia are going in the wrong direction.

**Graph 28:** Russia's political direction

**Thinking about Russia, are things generally going in the right direction in the country today, or is the country going in the wrong direction? (In %)**



Source for Russians in Russia: Levada Poll of June 2024

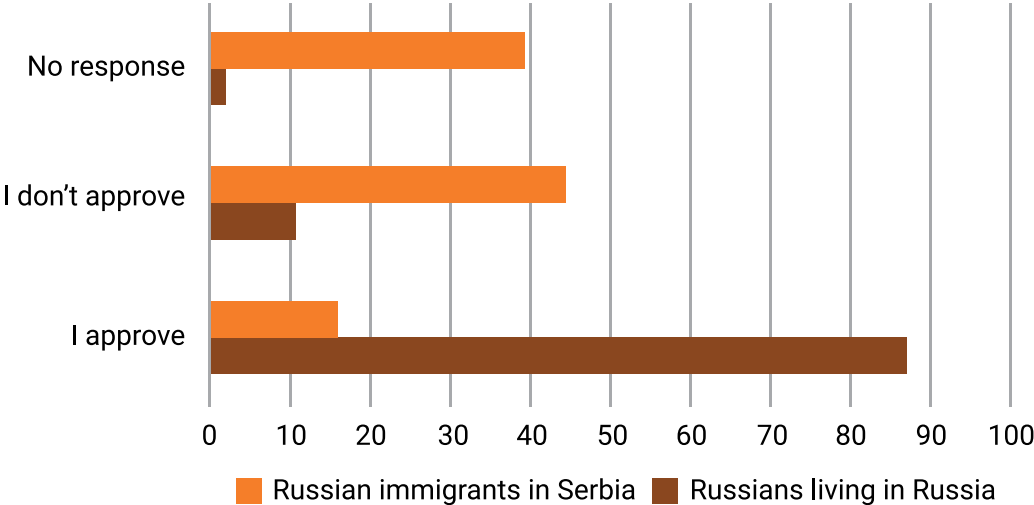
When asked about their approval of the activities of Russian President Vladimir Putin, 87% of Russians living in Russia expressed their [approval](#),<sup>43</sup> whereas only 15.9% of those in Serbia did. This difference can't be explained away simply by the lower average age of the Russians living in Serbia. For example, 82% of Russians aged 18–24 living in Russia approved of Putin's activities, compared to just 12.2% of Russians in Serbia within the same age group who responded positively to the same question.

<sup>3</sup> For providing the data on the latter we are grateful to the Levada Center, the leading independent Russian pollster still working in the country under extremely difficult circumstances.

At the same time, 39.4% of Russians living in Serbia chose not to respond to the question about Putin, which is a disproportionately higher level of caution compared to respondents in Russia (2%). Following the discussions with respondents from the qualitative survey, as well as the experience of interviewers from the public opinion survey, we can assume that most of the people refusing to answer to this question are afraid of potential prosecution by Russia or extradition by Serbia to their home country and are thus reluctant to engage in sensitive questions with the interviewers.

**Graph 29:** Approval of Vladimir Putin

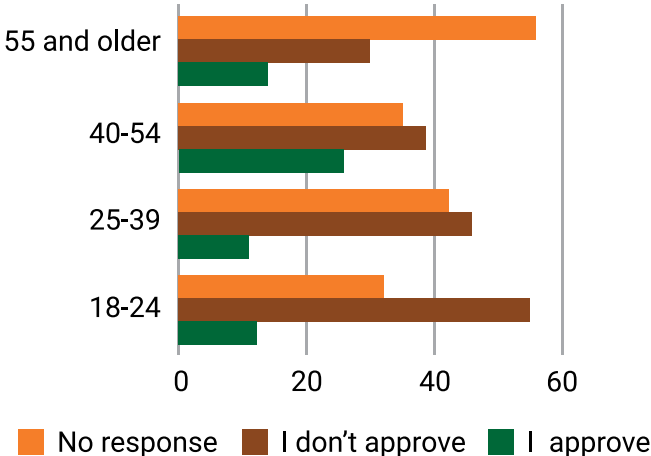
**Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin's activities as President of Russia? (In %)**



Source for Russians in Russia: Levada Poll of June 2024

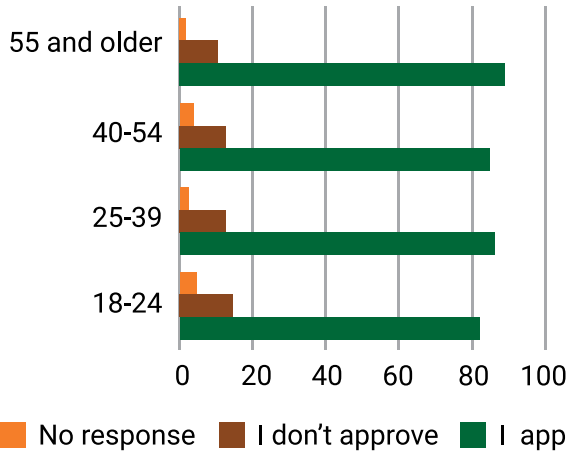
**Graph 30:** Approval of Putin by Russians in Serbia (by age, %)

**Do you generally approve or disapprove Vladimir Putin's activities as President of Russia? (by age)**



**Graph 31:** Approval of Putin by Russians in Russia (by age, %)

**Do you generally approve or disapprove Vladimir Putin's activities as President of Russia? (by age)**

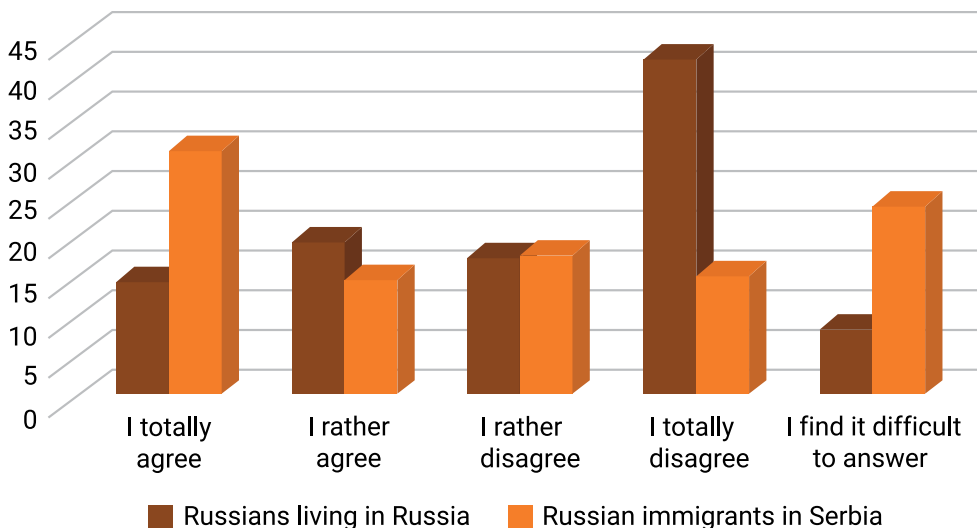


Source for Russians in Russia: Levada Poll of June 2024

When asked about LGBT rights, 44.7% of respondents agreed that LGBT individuals should have the same rights as others, while nearly a third disagreed, and a quarter remained undecided. In comparison, a Levada Centre [poll](#) conducted in October 2021 – the most recent available due to the anti-LGBT legislation adopted by the Russian authorities after that – found that 59% of Russians in Russia opposed granting equal rights to “gays and lesbians.”<sup>44</sup> This suggests a lower level of opposition among respondents in our survey.

**Graph 32:** Opinion on LGBT rights

**Do you agree that gays and lesbians (LGBT) should have the same rights as other citizens or not?**



Source for Russians in Russia: Levada Poll of October 2021

Among interviewees, LGBT is mainly viewed as a strictly private issue. Participants were neither supportive nor opposed to it. Few openly support the LGBT community, noting that LGBT rights in Serbia, as in most countries, are not protected:

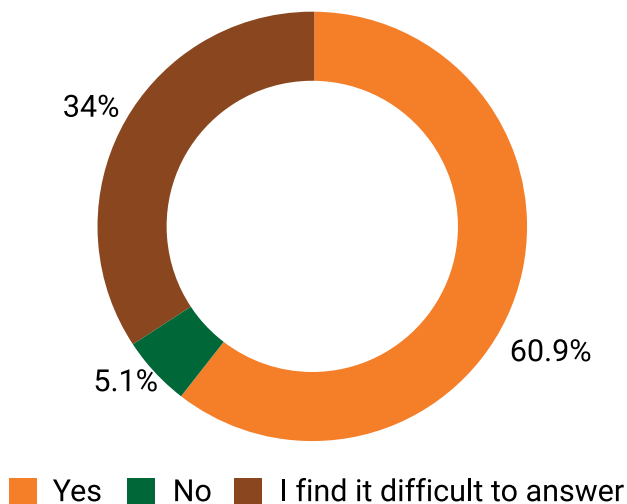
“An absolutely neutral position. I have nothing against it, but at the same time, I can’t say that I am very supportive. I can’t say that I would support that, but at the same time, well, people live like this, so they like it that way. I do not interfere in their personal lives.”  
(Female, 30–39 years old)

“I don’t think LGBT people are protected. They did not meet any hatred here, but from the point of view of legalization, there are certainly no laws that support it. There are no marriages here.”  
(Male, 30–39 years old)

Our survey also raised some questions on political attitudes that were not directly raised by the Levada centre. When answering the question of whether Russia should strive for democratic reforms, more than half of the questioned Russians in Serbia agree (60.9%) and with only a small percentage speak against (5.1%). However, 34% of respondents find this question difficult to answer, which again may indicate a reluctance or fear of the significant minority of Russians in Serbia to express their political views.

**Graph 33:** Support for democratic reforms in Russia

**Do you think Russia should strive for democratic reforms?**



Similar tendencies were confirmed in the interviews. Russian domestic politics is largely viewed negatively, with the country’s leadership perceived as striving to tighten the regime. Russians in Serbia are discontent that opposition activists are persecuted, and the quality of life for the middle class in Russia has deteriorated.

“If I could evaluate Russian politics positively, I wouldn’t be here, at least.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

“The only difference between Russia and North Korea is that North Korea closes its borders, while in Russia the policy is the opposite, aiming to expel people who are potentially dangerous to the regime.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

On the other hand, some believe that Putin knows what he is doing and how to bring the war and the ensuing crisis to an end. They also downplay shortcomings of domestic politics, stating that everything is not so bad given that Russia is a country at war:

“I don’t want to justify the war, and I won’t justify it, but this needs to be brought to an end in a way that no one suffers. Because I think if the government changes, it could change to one that doesn’t even know what to do. I think Putin knows what to do and how to bring this to an end so that, in the end, everything will be okay for everyone.” (Male, 20–29 years old)

“Russia conducts its political activities quite competently. In general, they achieve all the desired results.” (Male, 30–39 years old)

The comparison of political views on Serbia with the approval of Vladimir Putin suggests a strong alignment between support for Putin and a positive perception of Serbia’s political situation. Fifty-five point nine per cent of respondents who approve of Putin’s actions as the President of Russia also view the political situation in Serbia positively. This percentage is significantly higher than the 17.7% who support Putin but assess Serbia’s political situation negatively. Meanwhile, among those who oppose Putin, 35.8% have a positive view of Serbia’s politics, while 29.9% perceive it negatively.

**Table 1:** Approval of Putin and assessment of political situation in Serbia

		<b>Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin’s activities as the President of Russia?</b>			
		<b>Total</b>	<b>I approve</b>	<b>I don’t approve</b>	<b>No response</b>
		<b>Column N %</b>	<b>Column N %</b>	<b>Column N %</b>	<b>Column N %</b>
<b>Based on what you know or have heard, how do you assess the current political situation in Serbia?</b>	<b>Total</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	<b>Positively</b>	37.1%	55.9%	35.8%	30.9%
	<b>Negatively</b>	17.7%	12.6%	29.9%	5.9%
	<b>I do not know</b>	45.2%	31.4%	34.3%	63.2%



## | Attitudes towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine

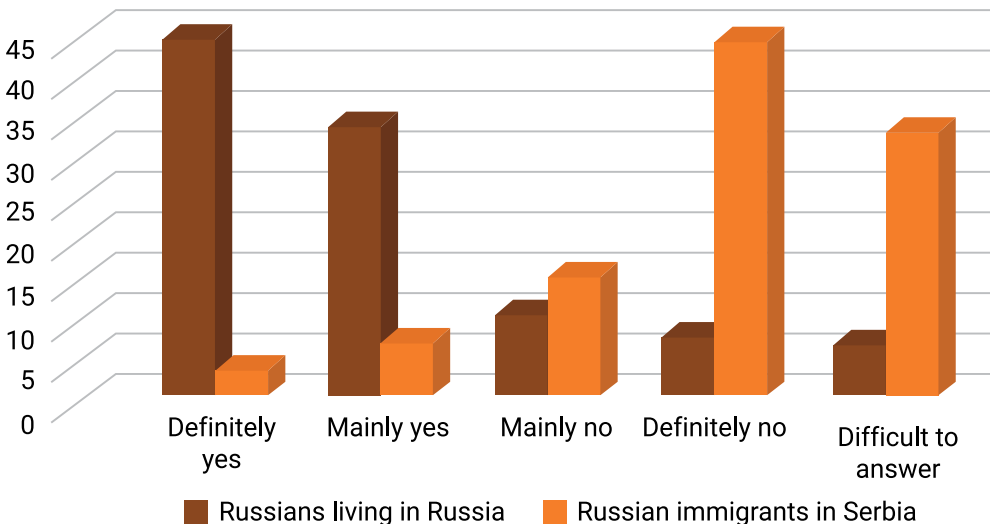
The comparison with the Levada Centre polls on the war issues reveal similar contrasts between Russians in Serbia and in Russia as comparison of their political views in general. Even though the majority of respondents in Serbia (60.7%) do not follow closely the situation in Ukraine, a significant portion (58.1%) expressed opposition to the actions of the Russian armed forces. In contrast, a Levada Centre [poll](#) from September 2024 revealed that 77% of Russians living in Russia supported the actions of their armed forces in Ukraine,<sup>45</sup> while only 9.4% of Russians in Serbia shared their views.

**Graph 34:** Following the situation in Ukraine



**Graph 35:** Support for Russian army in Ukraine

**Do you personally support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine or not?**

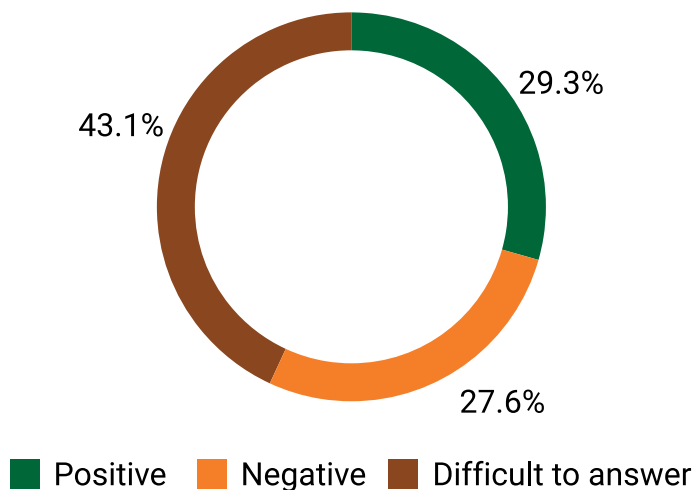


Source for Russians in Russia: Levada Poll of September 2024

Regardless of the fact that the majority of Russians in Serbia oppose the war, when asked about Ukraine, opinions were divided, with 29.3% expressing positive views of the country and 27.6% holding negative attitudes. It is important to acknowledge that a significant portion of respondents (43.1%) found the question difficult to answer.

**Graph 36: Opinion about Ukraine**

**What is your opinion towards Ukraine? (%)**



The interviews revealed that participants mostly follow the situation in Ukraine, but are often unwilling to discuss the reasons or express their opinions on this topic, as they are afraid it may impact their safety:

“I won’t give any assessments. We must be very careful with these topics.” (Female, 40–49 years old)

However, it is evident that Russian interviewees largely perceive this topic from a personal and “human” perspective, rather than through the lens of geopolitics or Russia’s foreign policy:

“I feel so sorry for the people. On both sides, I feel sorry. I don’t even know how to comment on this. It’s just awful.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

When asked about the Serbian people’s attitude toward the war, the interviewees perceive them as generally more supportive of Russia in the conflict, while also expressing some sympathy for Ukraine:

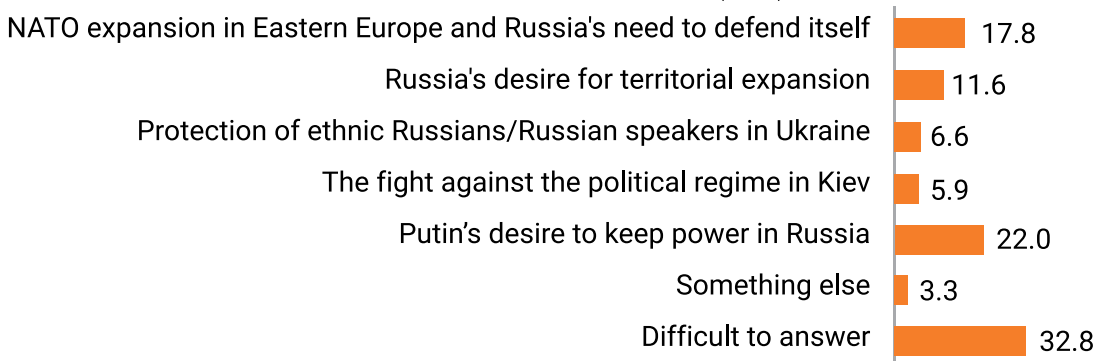
“My Serbian friends, friends, acquaintances say, well, we understand both sides and we feel sorry for everyone. They also say the enemy of my friend is my enemy. That’s why they support Russia more, but they sympathize with Ukraine very much.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

This is confirmed by the data [published](#) in a December 2022 Belgrade Centre for Security Policy publication “Beyond Sputnik and RT: How does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?”.<sup>46</sup> Choosing between “Russia”, “Ukraine”, and “the West”, when asked who they thought was mainly responsible for the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, 63% of the population of Serbia blamed the West, 11% blamed Russia, and only 5% blamed Ukraine.

Russians residing in Serbia have a quite different view on the roots of the war. Putin’s desire to keep power in Russia (22%) and NATO expansion in Eastern Europe (17.8%) are seen as main reasons for war in Ukraine. However, 32.8% of survey respondents did not want to respond to this question being afraid to express opinion on this sensitive topic.

**Graph 37: The reason to start the war in Ukraine**

**In your opinion, which of the following is the main reason for the start of the war in Ukraine? (In %)**



Based on interviews of Russians in Serbia, there is no common view on the reasons for the conflict, but there is an overall support for the idea that military actions should not be used to solve problems in modern society. Some believe that the main reason for the war was political ambitions of the people in power, political games, the expansion of NATO to the East, and the personal financial interests of politicians:

“Ambitions, ambitions, only political ambitions of people who have been in power for a long time.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

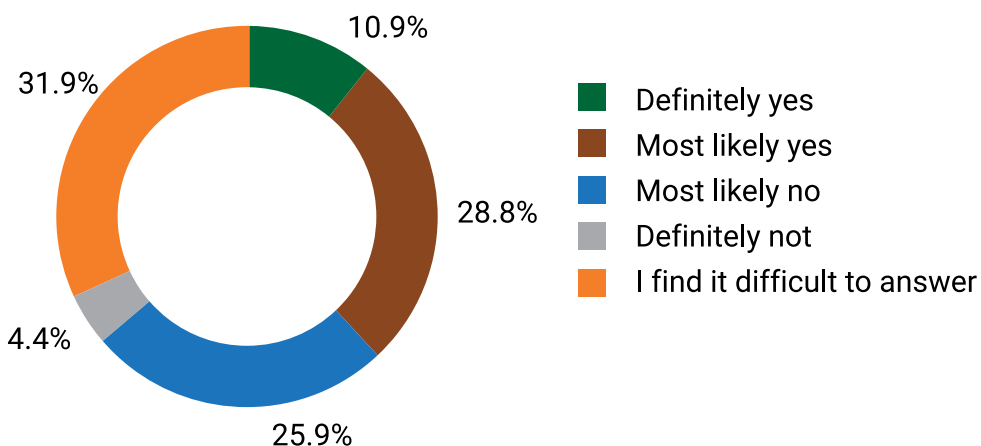
“Well, several factors caused it. But the main one is Vladimir Vladimirovich’s desire to rule forever. He started this war, for populist reasons, hoping to repeat the success of Crimea and boost his ratings. And the second reason – he’s very bored. He’s like a crazy grandpa playing war games.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

“I think the territory is probably not the most important thing. There must be something else. Some political game. Miscalculations. There wasn’t an expectation that it would take this long. That probably played a role too.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

The respondents are divided in opinions on whether the situation in Ukraine can develop into an armed conflict between Russia and NATO. While 40.8% think there is potential for it, 31.2% disagree, with 31.9% finding it difficult to address this question. This indicates differing perspectives on the geopolitical risks involved in the ongoing conflict.

**Graph 38:** Potential for a bigger conflict

**Can the situation in Ukraine develop into an armed conflict between Russia and NATO states?**



A comparison of the respondents' preferred information sources and their views on the war in Ukraine reveals notable trends. Among those who support the actions of the Russian armed forces, majority (27.6%) primarily rely on Russian or Serbian news, compared to only 6.7% who turn to international media. Conversely, among those who oppose these actions, a significant majority (67.3%) rely on international news sources.

**Table 2:** Support for the Russian armed forces and source of information

		Which of the following news and media outlets do you follow the most?				
		Total	Serbian news and media outlets	Russian news and media outlets	International news and media outlets	I do not follow any news and media outlets
		Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %
Do you personally support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine or not?	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Yes	9.4%	12.0%	15.6%	6.7%	4.9%
	No	58.1%	54.5%	58.1%	67.3%	49.5%
	Difficult to answer	32.5%	33.6%	26.4%	26.0%	45.6%

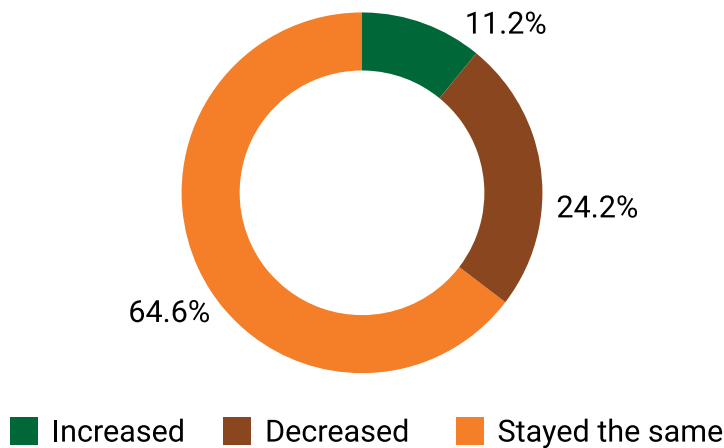
## | Potential for supporting democratic reforms in Russia

Considering the prevailing opinion on the current political situation in Russia, our research aimed also to reveal the interest of the Russian community in politics, as well as their civic and political engagement.

The survey indicates that for the majority (64.6%), the level of interest in Russian politics has remained unchanged since moving to Serbia.

**Graph 39:** Level of interest in Russian politics

**Has your interest in politics in Russia increased, decreased or stayed the same since moving to Serbia?**



As confirmed in the interviews, participants generally follow politics in Russia, and they are interested in what is happening in the country, because they still have friends and families there. Some noted that they don't take part in politics after leaving the country, although they used to be politically active:

“I follow the news less intensively than in Russia, but I'm still following with interest.” (Male, 30–39 years old)

“I ceased to take part in it.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

However, there is a divided opinion about discussing politics with other Russians. Some noticed that at the very beginning of the emigration, they often and actively discussed political events with other Russian expats. People, who left Russia, often share similar views and are ready to discuss politics with each other, although they do so less frequently than before. If their political views differ, many try to avoid this topic:

“Sometimes I discuss political topics with other people who left Russia, especially if something bright happens, for example. But we also discuss, for instance, the recent U.S. elections.”  
(Male, 30–39 years old)

“People who have a different opinion, absolutely don’t want to listen to mine. I’m not trying to convince them; I’m just telling my opinion. But they start arguing, so we just stop talking about it with those people who have a different opinion. And well, we discuss the latest news, but I discuss it with those who share the same opinion as me.”  
(Male, 20–29 years old)

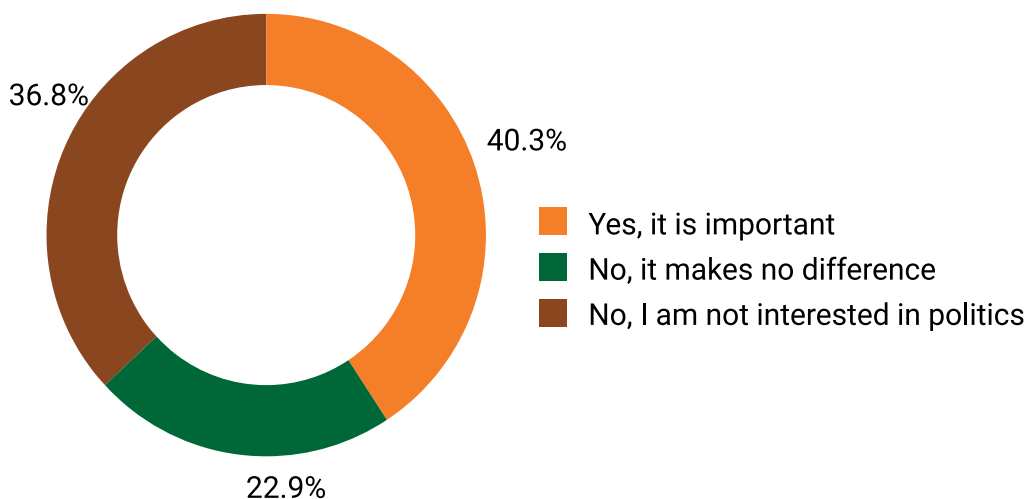
At the same time, political discussions with friends or relatives still living in Russia are quite rare, and some respondents avoid touching upon politics, as it has become a source of conflicts:

“Yes, we sometimes discuss it. I tell them that the sooner they leave, the easier it will be, and I don’t push my opinion too hard. We discuss it sometimes, but I can’t keep bringing it up all the time.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

Participation in Russian elections is deemed unimportant by 59.7% of respondents, primarily due to the lack of interest in politics or the belief that it has no meaningful impact.

**Graph 40:** Participation in the Russian elections

**Do you think it is important to participate in Russian elections (in Russia or abroad)?**



As confirmed in the interviews and by the data of the “Vote Abroad” organization and the Russian Central Election Commission, the majority didn’t vote in the Russian elections which were organized in Russian embassy in Serbia. Some wanted to participate but could not vote for various reasons (family duties, long queues, lack of time, and scarce information about the conduct of the polls). Some also believe that elections are a deficient way of making decisions in modern society and think that voting does not affect the results:

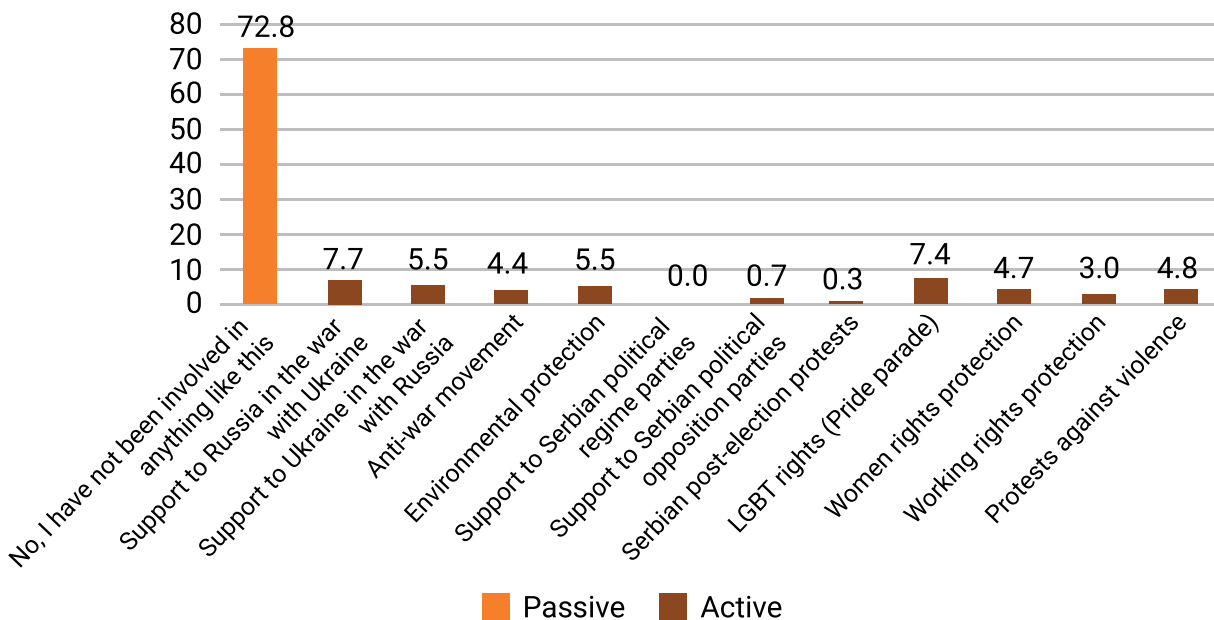
“No, I just tried to go and vote, but the polling station closed before my turn came, so I couldn’t.” (Male, 40–49 years old)

“I wanted to go to the elections. But I have a child. People were standing in line for 8 hours – it was impossible with a little child.” (Female, 30–39 years old)

Regarding political or civic engagement after leaving Russia, the vast majority (72.8%) reported no involvement in such activities. On the other hand, the active minority focused on diverse issues, such as support for Russia in the war with Ukraine (7.7%), support to Ukraine in the war with Russia (5.5%), anti-war movement (4.4%), or the protection of LGBT rights (7.5%).

**Graph 41:** Political and civic engagement

**Have you been involved in some form of political or civic activities after leaving Russia? Which ones? (In %)**



The interviews have revealed that although the respondents feel freer and safer in Serbia, many have not taken part in the events related to social and political problems after coming to Serbia, because they fear prosecution from the Serbian or Russian governments. Some have participated in an LGBT parade, others gathered at the Russian embassy on the day of Navalny's death, while only a few have taken part in anti-war protests:

"When Navalny was killed, people gathered at the embassy."  
(Male, 40–49 years old)

"I went to the pride. And when Navalny was killed - to the Russian embassy, and to an anti-war rally. I didn't go to eco protests."  
(Male, 30–39 years old)

"It seems that those people who moved are more active, and they are more likely to support certain views or defend their beliefs. And, for the most part, those who moved tend to support democratic values more." (Male, 30–39 years old)

When asked about participation in Serbian protests that happened after February 2022, interviewees stated that they were not ready to join. The main reason is the lack of understanding of Serbian domestic politics and the fears of being deported. Some state that they may participate in protests once they receive Serbian citizenship or if a protest issue concerns them personally:

"We are guests here. For now, we are nobody. It's not an easy situation here. We don't know many things, and it's wrong to go out somewhere or act with any intentions, even if those intentions are positive. I condemn that and would never do it. No." (Female, 40–49 years old)

"There have been stories when people participated in protests or something else and were even deported, and so on. So far, I do not."  
(Female, 30–39 years old)

"I think it's strange to fight for rights in your home country while you're on foreign soil and to fight for local ideologies that you're not even familiar with. You're still not familiar with them. You don't have the right to yet." (Female, 30–39 years old)



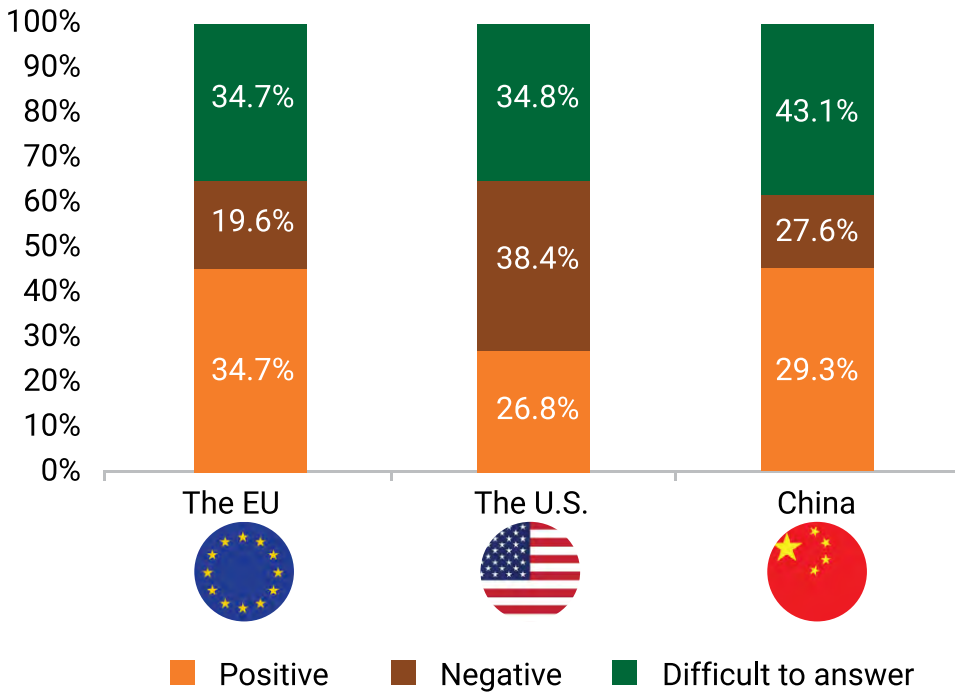
## | Attitudes toward foreign actors

In addition to the views on Russian politics, our research aimed to reveal the attitudes of respondents towards world's main powers.

The results showed that more than a third have difficulties expressing opinions of the named actors, but, in general, positive opinions towards China and the EU prevail, while there are dominantly negative opinions towards the U.S.

**Graph 42:** Attitudes toward great powers

### What is your general attitude towards great powers (In %)



## Conclusion

Both the public opinion survey and the deep interviews conducted with the sample representatives of Russians in Serbia confirm the existing assumptions that this community of expats, unlike their co-nationals in Russia, tends to be liberal, pro-democratic, against the regime of Vladimir Putin and its war of aggression in Ukraine. These findings largely dispel fears that the new Russian community in Serbia may become a destabilizing factor in the region or turn into an instrument of spreading Moscow's propaganda and influence.

Apart from these general conclusions, both the quantitative and the qualitative research have revealed that the Russian community in Serbia is highly educated (66.4%) and largely self-employed (42.4%). Most Russians in Serbia (57.4%) indicate security reasons, or lack of safety in Russia, as the main reason for coming to Serbia. A vast majority feel safe in their new country of residence (96.5%) and feel well-adapted to the new living environment (81.5%), where a significant portion (40.2%) intends to stay in Serbia for at least the next five years.

Even though the majority does not perceive Serbia as merely a transit station on their way to the one of Western states, as many as 56.9% claim that they would return to Russia when the war in Ukraine ends, and a significant portion (38.5%) in case of regime change in Moscow. This is largely because the majority of Russians in Serbia (51.9%) believe Russia is currently moving in the wrong direction, support democratic change (60.9%) in their country, and oppose the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine (58.1%). Due to repressive laws in Russia and fear of the long hand of the Kremlin in Serbia, a common feature of both the quantitative and the qualitative research tends to be a fairly high percentage of people that avoid answering the most sensitive political questions on the war in Ukraine (32.8%), democracy in Russia (34%) and the approval of Putin (39.4%).

Although the majority of Russians in Serbia largely do not follow nor understand the political developments of their new country of residence, the cross reference of answers to questions about the state of democracy in Serbia and Russia offers interesting results. As many as 55.9% of respondents who support Putin's regime evaluate the political situation in Serbia positively, whereas only 12.6% view it negatively. When it comes to Russians who oppose the regime in Moscow, the results are mixed: almost 30% view the political situation in Serbia negatively, whereas 35.8% see it positively. As the survey has demonstrated, the latter do not delve deeply in Serbian politics and content with simply feeling safe and being well-received in their new country of residence.

Finally, when it comes to the question of whether the Russians in Serbia can potentially present a base for a democratic change in Russia one should remain sceptical since the majority of them (72.8%) don't show much willingness for a more active political engagement. Although a vast majority of Russians in Serbia tend to be against Putin and the war in Ukraine, the Romanian comedian's "Coca-Cola refugees" joke from the beginning of this research paper still rings somewhat true: most of the Russians in Serbia prioritize their safety and economic well-being and are not ready to jeopardize them by political activities against the regime back home.

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