Dima Belysh stood in the empty park amphitheater in his orange hoodie and dirty white sneakers. He was in the middle of a 24-hour performance art piece dedicated to his hasty flight from his home country of Russia here to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. When I showed up I was the only spectator, so he had plenty of time to talk. He was pondering what had gone wrong.

“It’s ironic,” he told me. “I went from a place I didn’t feel at home to a place that is not welcoming me.”

He had been openly against the war, but his prospects outside of Russia – he didn’t have much money and doesn’t speak anything other than Russian – were meager. So he stayed. But when Vladimir Putin announced a general mobilization at the end of September, he had no choice.

Georgia was a logical destination: it was one of the few countries with a border that remained open to Russians unable to afford plane tickets. But tens of thousands of Russians had the same idea, and border guards on the single crossing into Georgia were overwhelmed. It was a short-term humanitarian disaster; in the no-man’s land of the border there was no food or bathrooms or anything available to those who had to wait, in many cases, more than 24 hours to get across.

This performance was a small way to start to reckon with that experience and the larger meaning of leaving Russia. But his timing was bad: he had scheduled it for a day when Russia had just embarked on a newly vicious campaign, aiming at Ukrainian civilian infrastructure to deprive the population of electricity and heating. Dima had tried to promote the event on social media ahead of time, but his posts drew a barrage of negative comments, particularly from Georgians and Ukrainians whose tolerance for Russian anything, much less self-pity, was worn down to zero. “This is not Putin’s war. This is Russia’s war,” one commenter wrote.

“We faced a lot of hatred and bad reactions and this made us think, are we doing something wrong?” Dima’s artistic partner Max, who had fled at the same time, told me. “We haven’t been affected by war in the same way that Ukraine and Georgia, we are much more privileged in this regard. But at the same time we are still refugees … we are artists and this is our method of dealing with reality.”

Dima and Max were two of a massive influx of Russian emigrants who have come to Georgia, mostly Tbilisi, since the start of the war. While Georgia is a logical destination from a logistical point of view, from a political and cultural perspective it is a deeply fraught one.

A centerpiece of Georgia’s post-Soviet national identity is a centuries-long victimization by Russia. Georgians have [long insisted](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/georgia-protests-are-not-a-showcase-of-russophobia/) that their grievance is only with the Russian state – and over the last two decades more specifically with Vladimir Putin – not with individual Russians. But the pressure of the invasion of Ukraine has eroded that distinction. The flight of tens of thousands of Russians who consider themselves victims of their own state comes just as Georgians are more inclined than ever to place collective responsibility for the war in Ukraine on all Russians.

The mass migration has roiled Georgia and confronted it with knotty moral questions: Who counts as a victim? What responsibility does a citizen hold for the actions of his or her state? How do we allocate sympathy for different sorts of victims? Is our supply of sympathy limited?

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Very quickly after the war in Ukraine began, graffiti began popping up around my neighborhood in Tbilisi, Mtatsminda, and its cobbled streets that climbed up steeply from the city’s central avenue. “FUCK RUSSIA” and “FUCK PUTIN” (in English). “Russian warship, go fuck yourself” (in the Ukrainian sailor’s iconic Russian).

They were sprayed on the picturesquely crumbling plaster walls, beneath ornate 19th-century balconies, on plywood fences blocking off new gentrifying construction projects, of Mtatsminda and other central Tbilisi districts. These neighborhoods have long attracted foreigners, including hundreds of thousands of tourists and a good number of expat residents from around the world. That includes me – I have lived in Mtatsminda for three years.

Starting very soon after the launch of the war in February 2022, a new group of foreigners began arriving here: young Russians fleeing their home country and its unpredictable, frightening future.

Tbilisi had already seen a mini-Russian boom the year before, as the Kremlin significantly tightened the screws on independent organizations and media, forcing many activists and journalists to flee abroad. Now, the influx was massive. It quickly became more common to hear Russian spoken in my neighborhood than Georgian, and the nation’s vaunted hospitality came under strain.

It was an anxious time for Georgians, who have a difficult relationship with Russia, and the invasion of Ukraine evoked a complex set of emotions: sympathy for Ukrainians and fear that, if Russia emerged victorious, it might turn its gaze back to Georgia, which had been the victim of its own Russian invasion in 2008. If Russia won in Ukraine, Georgians had reason to fear that the Kremlin would be emboldened and aim come finish the job it stopped in 2008. If it lost, though, small and weak Georgia could be an easy consolation prize.

There was also hate. Even before the graffiti started to pop up, there was writing on virtual walls, [outpourings of vitriol](https://eurasianet.org/rising-georgian-backlash-to-russian-influx) on social media. My Georgian friends whom I had previously thought of as liberal or apolitical suddenly started passing around spiteful memes, including one that read, “Dear Citizens/Natives of the Russian Federation! You are not welcome to Georgia.” Concerned citizens circulated a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/გაუქმდეს-უვიზო-რეჟიმი-რუსეთის-ფედერაციასთან) to institute a visa regime for Russians.

Otherwise sensible people argued that the Russians fleeing to Tbilisi posed a threat, suggesting that Putin might use their presence in Georgia as a pretext to “liberate” them. Others said that the Russians should have remained at home and tried to overthrow Putin, and that they were to blame for not having done so before the war. Still others suggested that the Tbilisi Russians were merely pretending to be against the war in Ukraine, and even if they professed to the contrary, the rot of Russian colonialism was so deep that even self-proclaimed dissidents could not wash off its stench. Many made all these arguments, and more, at the same time.

Reports circulated of fistfights at bars between Russians and Georgians. Telegram channels spread anonymous recordings in Georgian-accented Russian threatening to beat up Russians. Given that the Kremlin considers Russophobia in Ukraine to be a justification for war there, the situation felt pregnant with tension.

One 20-something Russian human rights activist who came after the 2021 crackdown initially settled in happily. (She insisted on anonymity out of concerns for the safety of her family in Russia.) “But when the war started, things changed radically,” she told me. “Georgians became hostile to Russians overnight. Before the war I would never think people would be hostile.” While she made some Georgian friends soon after arriving, she and other Russian exiles told me that friendly contact with Georgians became far more difficult, as Georgians’ interest in befriending Russians waned while the supply of those Russians shot up.

She took a trip to the Black Sea coast and tried to reserve a place to stay on Airbnb and Booking.com, but several would-be hosts refused to rent to her because she was Russian. One wrote that she should instead “go back to Russia and fight Putin.” (The message was in Georgian; she used Google Translate.) She tried to explain that she could not return to Russia. “I was so angry, I told him ‘I am a human rights activist, I am a journalist, I have friends who were tortured,’” she said. He asked her to send documents proving she was persecuted, and only then, she recalled, did he say that “maybe we will let you stay.”

She asked one taxi driver, in Russian, if he spoke Russian. He rolled his eyes and didn’t say anything, she recalls. Then after a couple of minutes, he asked – in Russian – “Why do you assume that everyone speaks Russian?” “I didn’t assume! I asked!” He, too, told her she should have stayed and fought against Putin. “Ugh,” she sighed. “I really loved Tbilisi before.” (what language is this happening in?)

In the absence of regular communication between regular Georgians and Russians, graffiti seemed to fill the vacuum. It became ubiquitous around Tbilisi’s central districts; you couldn’t walk 50 meters without coming across a “Ruzzia is a terrorist state.” And over time it seemed to become less about Russia the state and more about Russians as people. “Ruzzki go home” and “Ruzzki not welcome.” (The “Z” referred to the Russian state’s half-swastika symbol for the war.) “Fuck off home” in Russian. “Russians go back to ur ugly country.”

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While Russia has dominated Georgia for two centuries, the current Georgian grievance against Russia centers around the two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both home to eponymous ethnic minorities. These both broke away in separatist wars in the 1990s; hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians had to flee the territories. Their self-proclaimed governments are now propped up by Russia, which has military bases in each. Now a popular talking point is that Russia thus “occupies” 20 percent of Georgia. (Some of the new graffiti reads “Occupants go home.”) It was Georgia’s attempt to retake control of South Ossetia that led to the 2008 war, in which Russia not only pushed Georgian forces out of South Ossetia but briefly advanced well inside Georgia proper. According to official figures from each side, 224 Georgian and 162 South Ossetian civilians were killed.

For many Georgians, the 2008 war and Russia’s presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are just the latest chapters in a centuries-old story of Russia thwarting Georgia’s national ambitions. And they see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a similar oppression of people they now consider kin. Empathy with Ukraine is widespread, as are attempts to equate the two struggles; one liberal magazine started a campaign to recognize what happened to Georgians in Abkhazia as a “genocide,” the campaign is called “Before Bucha there was Abkhazia.”

In my conversations with Russians here I have found them aware only of the vague outlines of what happened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the wars in Georgia are a blip in the story Russians, both pro- and anti-government, know about their country.

Georgia has long held a rich place in the Russian imagination: it is famous for its wine and food, its legendary hospitality, its spectacular mountains, its sunny weather (at least compared to Russia). Russians “love” Georgia, but through an often patronizing lens: Georgians are known to be good lovers, drinkers, raconteurs and bon vivants, but are not really taken seriously.

This romantic imaginary has little place for the real Georgia and its current politics, about which most Russians know very little. But even in the rough outlines that Russians are aware of, Georgia “has something to attract everyone,” one Russian friend who has been here for several years told me. Liberals admire the 2003 Rose Revolution and the rule of ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili, a strong-arming Westernizing reformer who stomped out petty corruption. Conservatives love Georgia’s reputation for traditional values, where men are men and women are women and queers invisible.

But even if the Russian emigres don’t engage much with Georgian domestic politics, domestic politics definitely engages with them. The mass emigration has become one of the many issues that the ruling party and the opposition squabble over; opposition parties have campaigned into introduce visa regimes for Russians and other restrictions, while the ruling party has tried to downplay the issue by emphasizing that many of the new arrivals are in fact ethnic Georgians and that many of them use Georgia only as a stepping-off point en route to other destinations.

The emigres are one element in a larger story about the Georgian government’s response to the war in Ukraine. The ruling party seems to be trying to engage in a balancing act, in its actions maintaining the country’s pro-Western orientation – enforcing international sanctions against Russia, voting with the West on UN resolutions, even taking the opportunity to apply for EU membership – while its words have been telling a different story. While senior officials have studiously avoided criticizing Russia, they have been far more critical of the Ukrainian government, and have lately dabbled in anti-Western conspiracy theories. The actions have proven mostly successful, drawing praise from both Moscow and Western capitals, while the words have enraged many Georgians, who want the government to take a stronger stand in support of Ukraine.

There are regular controversies about well-known Russian opposition figures who are refused entry into Georgia, which the opposition uses as fodder for their argument that the government is kowtowing to the Kremlin. It’s a murky topic; the govermment definitely does seem to be blocking people who they fear might cause a bad reaction from the Kremlin, but at the same time there are plenty of other significant Russian opposition figures and organizations who have set up shop here since the war. In any case, the former cases are widely publicized by Georgian opposition figures and media. The blocked oppositionists are contrasted to what is believed to be the largely feckless mass of Russians who are in fact here.

At one point I noticed that some of my neighbors had printed and hung a sign on their balcony, reading (in Russian): “It is not the time to enjoy yourself when at this very moment RUSSIANS are killing and torturing CHILDREN in Ukraine! If you ‘fled’ from Russia, PROTEST OR MOURN AT HOME!”

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It can be tempting to overinterpret graffiti; it could be the work of an unrepresentative handful of people. But as I started to meet and interview Russians about their exodus, I noticed they frequently brought it up. Representative or not, the street markings were becoming a significant part of their experience, a visual bullhorn constantly announcing what (at least some vocal portion of) Georgians thought about them and their country.

“It works,” one Russian academic who moved here a few months after the start of the war told me, when I asked about the graffiti. He compared the experience to a real-life Twitter, where some months before he had called attention to some unfair treatment of Russian emigres and was attacked as a result. He eventually deleted his Twitter account, but the Tbilisi graffiti is a reminder: stay quiet. “B​eing on the streets, especially the first time I came to Tbilisi, it felt like I was inside the Twitter feed, it was a metaverse-like experience. Only you can’t really unfollow it.”

Dima, the performance artist, told me that he didn’t believe that it was Georgians writing the Russophobic graffiti, but Russians themselves. This belief – which I later heard repeated by many other Russians in Tbilisi – was spawned by a social media post that had gone viral in the fall. A Russian man had filmed himself spraypainting “Fuck Russians :)” on a Tbilisi wall. It was picked up in a [tweet](https://twitter.com/nordalin/status/1585759159886249984) with the caption “It turns out that all the Fuck Russians graffiti is written by … a Russian guy,” and went viral among Tbilisi’s Russians. “There is no bigger Russophobe than a Russian,” went a typical comment.

I was skeptical, so I tracked down the video’s graffitist, Andrei Mitroshin, a punk musician who had fled Moscow soon after the war started, first to Yerevan and then on to Tbilisi. He told me that he just posted the video as a comment on a friend’s post “as a joke, and from there someone took it at face value.” He had even [posted on Telegram](https://t.me/trahodron/1431) the day after it went viral:

The IRONY is that it was written by a Russian (me)

The POST-IRONY is that it’s possible to imagine that all this graffiti was written by Russians, to intimidate other Russians.

That correction, though, doesn’t seem to have had the same legs as the fake news tweet, which contained a kernel of truthiness that resonated with many Russians here. In his correction post, Mitroshin took pains to emphasize that the graffiti around the city did not represent his typical in-person reactions with Georgians.

“Living in Georgia for some time, every day we see on all the walls here are written ‘FUCK RUSSIANS,’ ‘RUSSIANS GO HOME,’ and so on. There are of course people here who don’t like Russians (for understandable reasons). And this graffiti often scares many Russians, and many are afraid to come here because of Russophobia that they have heard or read about somewhere,” he wrote. But he concluded: “Georgia is a wonderful country with wonderful and super friendly people. In the half year I have been here neither I nor any of my friends have encountered any aggression or Russophobia, and if you act normally and don’t support the war, everyone will treat you normally.”

Others had little difficulty believing that Georgians were behind the graffiti. One recent emigre and a fellow amateur scholar of the anti-Russia graffiti, Alexander, who didn’t want to give his full name, gave me a little tour of his neighborhood, Vera, not far from mine.

He had heard many of his compatriots espouse the theory that the graffiti was Russian-written, and he was marshaling evidence that it wasn’t. On one wall was a variation of a ubiquitous graffito: “Putin is a dickhead.” But this one mixed a Russian “i” and a Ukrainian “kh” in a way no native speaker of those languages would have. Nearby was another bit of graffiti, the classic “Russian warship go fuck yourself.” I had already noticed this one; it was missing one “s” in “Russian.” Alexander said that was something even a native speaker could do if in a hurry and careless. What was more telling, he pointed out, was the way some of the Cyrillic letters were written. The Russian “y” bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Georgian “kh,” and the Russian “b” to the Georgian “n.” “It was definitely Georgians who did this,” he said.

I had never really doubted it, and Georgians didn’t need any convincing that the graffiti was domestically produced, either. There have been some [small](https://www.facebook.com/Shecvale/photos/a.104893997579881/948745489861390/?paipv=0&eav=AfasW2RcrCQavYzRW6_vKaxgKM5QvqXv72cZ6Z6feIVj9GNhG-8sQyRNjk4k-5SRD4w&_rdr) social media [brouhahas](https://www.facebook.com/tabula.ge/posts/5663827443646271/?paipv=0&eav=AfabROo4Ckj2BQhY1YjNsTvK8b1FsAO8NgoTiPumptKCnQCEJG4R44tiL-_8lJ-TScU&_rdr) on the rare occasions when the city has cleaned up some anti-Russia graffiti; to many liberal Georgians it fed the theory that the government was secretly pro-Russia. The graffiti, they felt, was expressing the will of the people.

The inability of many Russians to believe that Georgians were writing the graffiti, though, seemed to speak to their naivete, or maybe a willful ignorance, about how people saw them.

Many of the Russians I have spoken with have experienced a profound shock about the nature of their country, and many have virtually overnight written it off forever. The dominant impulse seems to don a collective hair shirt. Many Russian establishments are identifiable by the Ukrainian flag on display and a poster with a QR code letting you donate to the Ukrainian armed forces. If they bring up some way in which Russian emigres are poorly treated, it is invariably prefaced with “Of course, it’s nothing compared to what Ukrainians are going through.”

“Decolonization” is a hot topic. Dima, in his 24-hour performance piece, had a lot of time to kill and he had brought along some reading: a Russian translation of Internal Colonization, a 2011 book by historian Alexander Etkind that reimagined Russian history through the lens of postcolonial theory. For obvious reasons, it has gained currency and popularity since the start of the war. “Maybe it has some answers for me,” Dima said.

The good intentions, though, occasionally come off as cringeworthy. The Russians have brought with them a lifestyle common in Moscow in St. Petersburg, where charity work and self-improvement lectures are trendy. It developed out of Russia’s lack of space for any real civic engagement, but imported to Georgia, it can seem patronizing. I was struck by a notice I saw on Instagram for a lecture, in Russian, about what people can do about Tbilisi’s street animal problem: as if Russians didn’t have bigger problems to think about, and Georgians couldn’t manage their problems by themselves.

Of course Americans, Brits, and many other residents of colonizing countries feel and act the same way toward Georgia’s many problems, it’s a universal expat impulse. But when Russians do it it comes off worse, burdened as it is with the baggage of two centuries of colonial development for which Georgians were expected to be grateful.

“Russians think there we don’t have anything without them, but it’s not true,” Zurab told me. He has a complicated identity: with a Georgian father and a Russian mother he grew up speaking Russian in Abkhazia. Nearly all ethnic Georgians were forced out during the war in the 90s and Zurab’s family fled to Moscow when he was a teenager. He moved to Tbilisi a few years ago and now runs a chain of popular bars here. “I’m half Russian and I still don’t like Russians,” he joked. He said he was generally in favor of the graffiti that had emerged, though he thought the message needed to be sharpened: “Putin isn’t a dickhead, he’s a murderer and a terrorist.”

Zurab tries to be a bridge between the two communities, hosting a Russian-language [podcast](https://www.youtube.com/@Radio_Dranda) about Georgia and pushing back against some of the extreme attempts to bully people in Tbilisi out of speaking Russian. But Russians underestimate Georgians’ antipathy toward them, he said.

“Young Georgians are not interested in Russia. They are like ‘leave us alone, we don’t know you, we never saw anything good from you guys, we don’t like you. We grew up without you and all we know from you is tanks, bombs, and killing,’” he said. “Our parents and grandparents were forced to be involved and oriented toward Russia. But we’re not.”

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It’s the bad behavior of the new arrivals that gets everyone’s attention. A friend told me about a Russian tourist who tried to get the entire dining room of his guesthouse in the mountains to raise a toast to the Russian special forces. (He was so drunk that he threw up on the spot shortly thereafter.) I saw a woman on a dating app write in her profile: “Don’t talk to me about occupation, I’m here on vacation.”

These kinds of things represent a miniscule fraction of the encounters I have had with Russians here, but they stand out even in my largely sympathetic mind. And for Georgian social media they are absolutely irresistible; posts describing episodes like this regularly go viral. One Georgian friend, himself fairly skeptical of the Russians who are coming here, said he has become tired of what has become a tedious ritual of Georgian parties: everyone taking turns sharing their particular grievance about what some Russian did.

Since this all began I have been wrestling with the moral ambiguities that the migration and its backlash have brought up, and I don’t feel like I am any closer to resolving them.

That the vast majority of Tbilisi’s new Russians were victims seemed beyond dispute; who can imagine being forced to leave their country, so quickly and possibly forever, because of the whims of one man?

But at the same time, to what extent had they indirectly benefited from the Russian state, whose massive gas and oil wealth underwrote the digital creative economy they built? These largely middle class Russians could afford now to live in the pricey center of Tbilisi; and their arrival was helping fuel inflation that the much poorer Georgians were now suffering from. (I myself was displaced earlier this year as my landlords sought a higher-paying renter. I moved to a less-attractive part of the city that, incidentally, has fewer Russians and virtually no anti-Russian graffiti.)

Still, the Russian emigres are for the most part doing all they can to be as unobtrusive as possible, at the minimum, and in many cases actively helpful. Do they need to be confronted with graffiti like “Not Velkom” (written in Cyrillic) or “Russian women=prostitutes” (in English)?

It seems that the ambiguity is rooted in the overlapping layers of responsibility and victimhood that allow anyone to be seen as either a perpetrator or a victim, depending on whether you’re looking above them on the power hierearchy or below them. Russia is certainly above Georgia on this scale. But the United States – Georgia’s closest ally – is above Russia, and its hard not to feel that the graffiti is underpinned by a global North dominance of the world’s information space. (As an American, I don’t recall once being asked to justify myself over the Iraq war, and I spent the months before and after the invasion in Turkey, Iran, Syria, Serbia, and mostly Iraq itself.)

And then there are the Abkhazians and Ossetians, who are below Georgia on the hierarchy but backed by Russia.

The narrative of Russian occupation obscures two critical elements in the story: that Georgia holds some significant share of responsibility for the wars of the 1990s, and that Abkhazians and South Ossetians do not consider themselves occupied. They, rather, mostly consider Russian backing as a necessary evil protecting them against the greater danger they see from Georgian nationalism.

While Georgians today like to argue that they are facing the same fight as Ukrainians, the closer analogy may be the opposite one: that Russia is now behaving toward Ukrainians as Georgians did to Abkhazians and South Ossetians in the 1990s. The dominant Georgian understanding of Abkhazians is that they are deluded about their own history and that they are “really” Georgians; it is an [unmistakeable parallel](https://ostwest.space/articles/georgia/23-the-political-memory-of-the-conflict-in-abkhazia-en) to Putin’s denial that Ukraine is a real thing, distinct from Russia. The war in Ukraine has only hardened this Georgian nationalism.” “The Russia-Ukraine war paralyzed the process of rethinking our conflicts making it almost impossible to discover and realize our own mistakes,” wrote Anna Dziapshipa, a Tbilisi-based filmmaker of mixed Georgian and Abkhazian background.

Meanwhile, the graffiti keeps proliferating and evolving. It’s not uncommon to see some graffiti painted over, messages altered in a kind of public conversation or debate. One common edit is to change “Fuck Russia” to “Fuck Putin.” Near me there is a “RUSSIANS FUCK OFF CUNTS,” and someone added above it: “NATIONALISTS OF ALL COUNTRIES GO FUCK YOURSELVES.” I have been monitoring another one in the neighborhood that started out as “Russians go home,” written in blue, to which someone edited the last word in yellow (for the colors of the Ukrainian flag), to read “Russians go help.” I just noticed it was changed again. Now it reads, “Russians go to hell.”

ENDS

A small community of Russians lived in Tbilisi before the war, mostly liberal young professionals who enjoyed the relative freedom and relaxed pace of life. A disproportionate number of bougie comforts in Tbilisi – craft beer bars, osteopaths, specialty coffeehouses, recycling enterprises – were run by Russians. They lived in expat ghettoes (as do I and most other Western expats), but had at least some possibilities to interact with Georgians. Once the war started, though, that became nearly impossible, both because of the sheer numbers of Russians who arrived and the political climate.