

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh) > Georgia > **'Ruzzki not welcome': the Russian exiles getting a hostile reception in Georgia**

'Ruzzki not welcome': the Russian exiles getting a hostile reception in Georgia

Wednesday 30 August 2023, by [KUCERA Joshua](#) (Date first published: 8 August 2023).

After the invasion of Ukraine, thousands of Russians fled to Tbilisi. But the graffiti that has sprung up across the city suggests not everyone is pleased to see them

Dima Belysh stood in the empty park amphitheatre in his orange hoodie and dirty white sneakers. It was November in Tbilisi, [Georgia](#), and he was in the middle of a 24-hour performance art piece dedicated to his hasty flight to the Georgian capital from his home in St Petersburg, Russia. When I showed up I was the only spectator, so he had plenty of time to talk.

"It's ironic," Belysh 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 in [Ukraine](#), but his prospects outside Russia - he didn't have much money and doesn't speak any language other than Russian - were meagre. So at first, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, he stayed. But when the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, announced a general mobilisation at the end of September, Belysh, as a man of draft age, had no choice but to leave the country or risk being conscripted into an army he did not support, to fight a war he found unjust.

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 in the small town in the Caucasus mountains that hosts Georgia's only land crossing with [Russia](#) were overwhelmed.

Belysh's performance was his small way of reckoning with his experience of leaving Russia. But his timing was awkward: he had scheduled it for a day when Russia had just embarked on a vicious new phase of its campaign, targeting Ukrainian civilian infrastructure in order to deprive the population of electricity and heating. Belysh had tried to promote the event on social media ahead of time, but his [post](#) 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 in response to Belysh's announcement.

Belysh is part of a massive influx of Russian emigrants who have settled in Georgia - mostly in Tbilisi, a city of 1.2 million people - since the start of the war. While the statistics are imprecise, government figures indicate that, as of October 2022, more than [110,000](#) Russians had arrived in Georgia since the start of the war. (The same report found that more than 25,000 Ukrainians had also relocated there since the start of the invasion.) The influx has overwhelmed the city, taxing its housing and social infrastructure, and exacerbating existing political and cultural rifts.

Intrinsic to Georgia's post-Soviet national identity is its centuries-long domination by Russia, dating from the late-18th and early-19th centuries, when Georgian kings requested Russian protection as a

security guarantee against attacks from the Persian Empire to the south. The Russians not only failed to prevent Persian aggression – Tbilisi was levelled during an invasion in 1795 – but annexed Georgia outright in 1801 and made it part of their empire. Thus began two centuries of rule from the north, which ended only in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Georgians have [long insisted](#) that their grievance is only with the Russian state, not with the Russian people. But the invasion of Ukraine has all but eroded that distinction. The flight of tens of thousands of Russians who consider themselves victims of their own government comes just as Georgians are more inclined than ever to place collective responsibility for the war in Ukraine upon all Russians. The mass migration has roiled Georgia and confronted it with knotty moral questions: who counts as a victim? What responsibility do citizens hold for the actions of their nations? How should we allocate our sympathy?

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, graffiti quickly began popping up around Tbilisi, in particular in its attractive historic centre. “FUCK RUSSIA” and “FUCK PUTIN”, many of them read (in English), or “Russian warship, go fuck yourself” – a reference to [the famous words](#) of a Ukrainian soldier on Snake Island in the Black Sea before he was taken captive by Russian forces in February 2022.

The graffiti was sprayed on Tbilisi’s picturesquely crumbling plaster walls, beneath ornate 19th-century balconies, on plywood fences blocking off new construction projects, in the gentrifying neighbourhood of Mtatsminda and other central Tbilisi districts. These areas have long attracted foreigners, including hundreds of thousands of tourists, and a good number of expats from around the world – I am American and have lived in Mtatsminda for three years.

Tbilisi had already seen a surge of Russian immigration in 2021, after the Kremlin significantly tightened the screws on independent organisations and media, forcing many activists and journalists to flee abroad. But that boom was far eclipsed in 2022, when it soon became more common to hear Russian spoken in my neighbourhood than Georgian.

The invasion of Ukraine evoked a complex set of emotions for Georgians: sympathy for Ukrainians and fear that Russia might soon turn its gaze back to Georgia, which it had previously invaded in 2008. If Russia won in Ukraine, Georgians had reason to fear that the Kremlin would be emboldened to come and finish the job it began in 2008. If it lost, they also feared that 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](#) on social media. Concerned citizens circulated a [petition](#) 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. Some said 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 that despite their attestations to the contrary, the rot of Russian colonialism was so deep that even self-proclaimed dissidents could not wash off its stench.

A friend told me about a fistfight at a bar between a Russian and a Georgian. A Telegram channel for Russians in Tbilisi posted an anonymous recording of someone (speaking 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 here in Tbilisi felt pregnant with tension.

One twentysomething 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.”

She took a trip to the Black Sea coast and tried to book a place to stay online, 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”.

The Russian arrivals settled into self-contained émigré quarters, and in the absence of regular communication between Georgians and Russians, graffiti seemed to fill the vacuum. It became ubiquitous around Tbilisi’s central districts; you couldn’t walk 50 metres without seeing “Ruzzia is a terrorist state”. 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 symbol for the war.) “Fuck off home” in Russian. “Russians go back to ur ugly country.”

While Russia has dominated Georgia for two centuries, the current Georgian grievance against Russia centres on the two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both home to eponymous ethnic minorities. Both broke away from Georgia 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% of Georgia. (Some of the new graffiti reads: “Occupants go home.”) Georgia’s attempt to retake control of South Ossetia led to the 2008 war, in which Russia not only pushed Georgian forces out of South Ossetia but briefly advanced well inside Georgia proper, with significant attacks reaching the central city of Gori, and Poti in the far west. According to official figures from each side, 228 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. (That war took place just months after Nato promised that it would eventually accept Georgia as a member.) They see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a similar attack upon people they now consider kin. One liberal magazine has [started a campaign](#) to recognise the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia as a “genocide”, the campaign is called Before Bucha there was Abkhazia.

In my conversations with Russians here in Tbilisi, 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 that Russians, whether pro- or anti-government, know about their country.

But even if Russian émigrés don’t engage much with Georgian domestic politics, domestic politics engages with them. Georgia’s ruling party seems to be trying to engage in a balancing act. Its actions are geared toward maintaining the country’s pro-western orientation: enforcing international sanctions against Russia, voting with the west on UN resolutions, applying for EU membership. Yet the words of its senior officials tell a different story. Lately, they have studiously avoided criticising Russia, and have been far more critical of the Ukrainian government, even dabbling in [anti-western conspiracy theories](#). These statements have enraged many Georgians who want the government to take a stronger stand in support of Ukraine; opposition parties and other critics accuse the government of kowtowing to Moscow.

So far, the government's tightrope act has, for the most part, worked. It has garnered praise from western capitals for adhering to the sanctions, and from Moscow for not doing much more. But this state of affairs is becoming increasingly unsustainable. In mid-May, after barely acknowledging Georgia's existence since the beginning of the war, Putin [dropped a bombshell](#): Russia would reverse a ban on direct flights to Georgia it instituted in 2019, and also remove visa restrictions for Georgians travelling to Russia. This development would have been welcomed in Georgia before the Russia-Ukraine war, but now it appeared to be a poisoned chalice, seemingly calculated to drive a wedge between the Georgian government and its allies in the west. And it worked: The [US](#) and the [EU](#) warned that allowing Russian airlines to fly to Georgia risked exposing Georgian companies to sanctions. Georgia went ahead with it anyway, [citing](#) the economic benefits of the travel resumption, a move that has drawn harsh criticism from Washington and Brussels.

The émigrés are caught up in this squabbling. The ruling party has sought to downplay the issue by emphasising that many of the new arrivals are in fact ethnic Georgians, and that a lot of them are using Georgia only as a transit point en route to other destinations.

There are regular controversies about Russian opposition-linked figures who are not let in to Georgia: critical journalists, a lawyer for opposition leader [Alexei Navalny](#), and a member of the activist group [Pussy Riot](#) are among those who have [reportedly](#) been denied entry since the war began. To the opposition in Georgia, these actions are proof that the Georgian government is doing the Kremlin's bidding. It's a murky topic, though: many Russians I spoke with do believe that the government may be blocking some people in order to prevent Tbilisi from becoming a hub of Russian opposition activity and attracting Moscow's ire; but at the same time, the number of Russian oppositionists who have been blocked is dwarfed by those who have been let in. Several opposition groups of exiled Russian journalists and activists have had no trouble setting up shop here.

A few months after the full-scale invasion began, I noticed that some of my neighbours 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!"

It can be tempting to overinterpret the graffiti. But as I started to meet and interview Russians about their exodus, they frequently brought it up. The street markings were a significant part of their experience, a visual bullhorn constantly announcing what (at least some vocal portion of) Georgians thought about them.

"It works," one Russian academic who moved here a few months after the start of the war told me. The graffiti was a reminder to stay quiet. He had been attacked on social media for suggesting that dissident Russians didn't deserve collective punishment for the war. He deleted his Twitter account and asked not to be named in this story. "Being on the streets, especially the first time I came to Tbilisi, it felt as if I was inside the Twitter feed," he said. "It was a metaverse-like experience - only you can't really unfollow it."

Belysh, the performance artist, told me he believed it wasn't Georgians writing much of the Russophobic graffiti, but Russians themselves. This belief - repeated by many other Russians in Tbilisi - originated with a social media post that went viral in the fall. A Russian man had filmed himself spray-painting "Fuck Russians :)" on a Tbilisi wall.

I was sceptical, so I tracked down the graffitist from the video, Andrei Mitroshin, a punk musician who had fled Moscow soon after the war started, first to Yerevan in Armenia, and then to Tbilisi. He told me he had 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](#) 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 his viral video, which contained a kernel of truthiness that resonated with many Russians here. In his correction post, Mitroshin took pains to emphasise that the graffiti around the city did not represent his typical in-person interactions 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,” he wrote. “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.” 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 street markings. Alexander, a recent émigré and fellow amateur scholar of anti-Russia graffiti who didn’t want to give his full name, gave me a little tour of his neighbourhood, Vera, not far from mine.

He had heard many of his compatriots espouse the theory that the graffiti was written by Russians, and he was marshalling evidence that it wasn’t. On one wall was a variation of a ubiquitous graffiti: “Putin is a dickhead.” But this one mixed a Russian “i” and a Ukrainian “kh” in a way no native speaker of either 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.

Georgians didn’t need any convincing that the graffiti was domestically produced either. There have been a few small social media brouhahas on the rare occasions when the city has [cleaned up](#) some anti-Russia graffiti; to many liberal Georgians, these cleanup efforts fed the theory that the government was secretly pro-Russia. The graffiti, they felt, was expressing the will of the people.

The fact that many Russians did not believe that Georgians were writing the graffiti, though, seemed to speak to a wilful ignorance about how their presence was being received.

Many of the Russians I have spoken with have experienced a profound shock about the nature of their country, and many have written it off for ever, virtually overnight. The dominant impulse seems to be to don a collective hair shirt. Many Russian establishments in Tbilisi 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 émigrés are poorly treated, it is invariably caveated with: “Of course, it’s nothing compared to what Ukrainians are going through.”

“Decolonisation” is a buzzword in the city. During his 24-hour performance piece, Belysh had a lot of time to kill, so he had brought along some reading: a Russian translation of *Internal Colonization*, a 2011 book by the historian Alexander Etkind that reimagines 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,” Belysh said.

“Russians think we don’t have anything without them, but it’s not true,” Zurab Chitaia 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 of Abkhazia during the war in the 90s, and Chitaia’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. He said he was generally in favour 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.”

Chitaia hosts a Russian-language [podcast](#) about Georgia in which he pushes back against some of the extreme attempts to bully people in Tbilisi out of speaking Russian. But he said that many Russians underestimate Georgians’ antipathy toward them. “Young Georgians are not interested in Russia,” he said. “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.’ Our parents and grandparents were forced to be involved and oriented toward Russia. But we’re not.”

The fact that Russians can still enter Georgia without doing anything more than showing their passport rankles many Georgians. Russia is only one of 95 countries whose citizens enjoy Georgia’s laissez-faire visa-free policy, but last year’s influx has spurred calls by the opposition to introduce visa requirements for Russians. The government has resisted, however, citing the economic benefit that the émigrés bring: the country’s GDP grew [more than 10% in 2022](#), and government officials have given [partial credit](#) to the Russian arrivals.

But the economic benefits have been distributed unequally. Landlords, restaurant owners and the like have done well out of the arrival of tens of thousands of middle-class consumers. Working-class Georgians, meanwhile, are suffering from the resulting inflation. After Putin’s mid-May announcement about restoring direct flights between Russia and Georgia, the visa debate flared up again, and this time the US embassy got involved: the ambassador [suggested](#) that Putin may intend to “use” the Russian presence to interfere in Georgia somehow. And while a few months earlier she had [urged](#) that “Georgia must continue to welcome those fleeing Russian repression”, now she was sympathetically noting that “many Georgians ... are concerned about the hundred thousand Russians who came to Georgia last year”.

To live in Tbilisi is to be enveloped in layers of responsibility and victimhood, to inhabit a hierarchy of perpetrators, colonisers and colonised. The influx of Russians has, in the view of many activists, complicated Georgian domestic politics and also hampered the nation’s efforts to reckon with its own history of dominating smaller nations. The origins of the wars of the 1990s are hotly contested, but a significant share of the responsibility lies with Georgia, a fact that is obscured by the narrative of “Russian occupation”. The occupation narrative also denies the agency of Abkhazians and Ossetians themselves – for the most part they do not consider themselves occupied, and view Russian backing as a necessary evil protecting them against what they deem the greater danger of Georgian nationalism. In today’s overheated atmosphere, these nuances are increasingly lost.

“The Russia-Ukraine war paralysed the process of rethinking our conflicts, making it almost impossible to discover and realise our own mistakes,” wrote Anna Dziapshipa, a Tbilisi-based filmmaker of 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 neighbourhood that started out as "Russians go home", written in blue, to which someone edited the last word in yellow (for the colours of the Ukrainian flag) to read: "Russians go help". Recently, it was changed again. Now it reads: "Russians go to hell".

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