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IRIS Graduate Student Summer Field Report (2025)

I study the relationship between macro-sociological change and migration across three life domains: work, family, and war. The IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award allowed me to travel to Antalya, Türkiye for a period of 10 weeks to study the lives of Russian and Ukrainian immigrants living there.

The preliminary research question that animated my study and led me to select my research site was the following: how do Russians and Ukrainians interact with one another on neutral territory, and how are their relationships affected by local perceptions of the conflict?

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 produced large, sustained outmigration both from Ukraine, as civilians fled from the ground invasion, aerial bombardment and generalized insecurity, and to a lesser extent from Russia, with draft-age men attempting to escape from the army. The geography of these two migration waves was significantly different: while most Ukrainian migrants fled to European countries who quickly extended them temporary protected status, Russian migrants instead headed to mostly post-Soviet countries now part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, with European countries imposing visa bans on Russian citizens. However, in a few cases both Russians and Ukrainians who had elected or were forced to leave their home countries found themselves face to face on neutral territory.

Türkiye is one such context that saw a significant uptick in both Ukrainian and Russian migration to the country post-2022. There is a historical precedent for this: in the 1980s, Türkiye became an important stop for Soviet shuttle traders who were participating in the black-market economy as the Soviet economy unraveled. After the 1990s, Türkiye became a popular tourism destination for both Russians and Ukrainians as post-Soviet economies started recovering, and subsequently a lucrative real estate investment location as the country experienced a construction boom in the 2010s. Thus, for both Russians and especially Ukrainians affected by the war, Türkiye was on the map as a place to escape to on a temporary or more permanent basis.

After researching potential locales in Türkiye for fieldwork, I selected Antalya as my field site because of its high presence of Russian and Ukrainian immigrants, as well as the existence of both established Russian and Ukrainian NGOs in the city. I spent my 10 weeks there laying the groundwork for more extensive research. I recruited my interviewees, of which there were 10, through a Turkish language class that I took, a digital nomad hub that I used as an office space, a choir that I joined that was largely composed of post-Soviet immigrant members, and leadership from the Russian and Ukrainian NGOs in the city.

I found substantial heterogeneity in both the Russian and Ukrainian communities' perceptions of one another. A majority of respondents claimed that their arrival to Türkiye was a signal in and of

itself that they were not interested in political conflict and discussing the war. However, several Russian and Ukrainian respondents did profess animosity towards the other group, and those who did tended to avoid the outgroup and speaking their respective language (this was especially true with Ukrainian respondents). Although I was told by respondents that tense and occasionally violent interactions manifested themselves shortly after 2022, these were largely episodic and petered out as the Russo-Ukrainian War became long-standing.

Local Turkish perceptions likewise mirrored the various positions that I found were held among both Russian and Ukrainian respondents. Although I did not formally interview Turkish locals due to my incomplete fluency in the language, I informally spoke to both people who did not distinguish between the Ukrainian and Russian populations living in the city, and those that instead blamed one side or the other for increasing the cost of living and rental prices after the start of the full-scale invasion and subsequent large-scale migration to Antalya. Both my Ukrainian and Russian respondents were aware these divergent positions, though they seemed to be largely unaffected by local perceptions, largely living within their own communities and only interacting with locals for daily needs and provisions.

The generosity of the IRIS grant allowed me to stay a long enough amount of time to discover other salient and interesting aspects of post-Soviet immigrant life in Antalya that warrant further study. First, many of my female respondents from both groups mentioned that post-Soviet women were particularly vulnerable to intimate partner violence, and some actively participated in online groups that seek to aid affected women. Second, Antalya's Chamber of Commerce and Industry had signed an agreement on cooperation with the Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry several years earlier, and as a result the city sometimes showcased Russian performers and cultural exhibitions. I found no equivalent relationship between Antalya and a Ukrainian city, although at least two statues of Ukrainian historical figures have been installed in the city in the past decade. Finally, the Russian community has been successful in setting up Orthodox services in a Greek church that has existed since the 19th century in the center of the city. This is no small feat given the rise of political Islam in 21st century Türkiye.

I hope to return next summer to continue my fieldwork. Thanks to IRIS, I have enjoyed making lasting connections and learning from my participants in a sociologically rich field site.