

9 UNREQUITED COMPASSION ACROSS THE BORDER: MONGOLIANS' SUPPORT FOR THE RUSSIAN-BURYAT EXODUS AFTER MOBILIZATION

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Introduction

This study examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 on Siberian Indigenous peoples. The military attack drastically changed global geo-politics and affected the socio-political behavior and perceptions among the people in both the involved and neighboring countries (Matsuzato 2023; Plokhly 2023). Public concerns are focused on the current developments of the war and the related political economy and international relations, although the mobility of the population both in Ukraine and Russia is another critical issue. The invasion has resulted in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, with more than 6.2 million people displaced.¹ It has also impacted refugee policies and multiculturalism in Poland and neighboring European countries (De Coninck 2023; Daidoji 2023; Lintner et al. 2023; Tomczak-Boczek et al. 2023).

The invasion has caused fissures within Russia regarding whether or not to support the government (Aburamoto 2022; Al Oraiimi and Antwi-Boateng 2023; Takayanagi 2023). Notably, since the invasion, Russia has experienced brain drain in the crucial information sector, which has damaged the Russian economy (Wachs 2023). In September 2022, Russia passed a decree to further mobilize soldiers, doubling their numbers, and resulting in a further exodus of Russian citizens to avoid conscription. The impact of the volatile socio-economic and political situations in Russia and Ukraine has been felt in the neighboring countries and beyond (Dadabaev and Sonoda 2023). The complex relationship between Russian immigrants and host country populations deserves attention – for instance, the situation in Georgia is characterized by both hospitality and hostility (Mühlfried 2023).

This study focuses on the Mongolian-Russian borderland from where Buryats who are Russian citizens emigrated to Mongolia after the mobilization decree of September 2022. Mongolia is one of the temporary or permanent countries of choice for the exodus. Besides ethnic Russians, ethnic minorities such as Buryats, Tuvans, and Kalmyks, all of whom are historically and linguistically related to the Mongols, have crossed the border as asylum-seeking migrants. In our analysis, we briefly describe

1 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> [accessed 23.12.2023]

the perceptions and experiences of both Buryat migrants from Russia and Mongolian hosts, including experiences of the asylum-seekers and volunteering activities of the Mongolian citizens during the Russian exodus. To this end, interviews were conducted to understand the attitude of the Mongolian government, NGOs, and individuals toward the Buryat migrants from Russia, the motives behind their support, the networks involved, and their afterthoughts. In this study, we have also introduced examples of the trans-border experience of these migrants to understand the route of the migration, the migrants' challenges, and their ways of adapting in the country of asylum. An examination of the complexities of these events allows us evaluate the impact of the invasion on the inter-ethnic relations in Northeast Asia.

The Russia-Ukraine war and anthropology

Several anthropologists and scholars in related fields have attempted to uncover the socio-cultural process behind the mobility during the invasion. Sopova (2023) reported on the damage to the Ukrainians' material life. Petryna (2023) theoretically examined the "de-occupation" – the resistance and solidarity mounted by Ukraine against the Russian invasion – and identified the invasion as a war which undermines Ukraine as an independent sovereign nation state, criticizing the Russian government's position of it being a "special military mission."² Some scholars have considered the civic and voluntary support activities in Poland as "distributed humanitarianism" in contrast with the large-scale United Nations (UN) assistance, and have examined the fine line between humanitarian and military support (Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023a).

In the field of Siberian studies, several scholars have investigated the disintegration of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North since the war started (or over the war issues) and the online protests outside Russia, threatening the international Arctic indigenous collaboration (Koresawa 2022; Osakada 2023). Others have looked into the roles of Siberian minorities in the Sakha and Tuva Republics in the war. Specifically, the connection between masculinity and patriotism, and gender-based attitudes toward the war in Sakha society has been examined (Habeck 2023). Similarly, the anti-war movement in the militarized Tuva Republic, from where the Russian minister of defense Sergei Shoigu hails, has received academic attention (Khovalyg 2023; Peemot 2023). Sherkhonov (2023) reported the comparatively higher number of war casualties across the ethnic regions in Russia, whereas Watanabe (2022) pointed out that the regional differences in mortality rates do not necessarily imply higher mortality of the ethnic minorities, owing to the factor of municipality-based statistics; he nonetheless highlighted the significance of ethnic factors for

2 Hereinafter we refer to the Russian invasion to Ukraine from February 2022 as the Russia-Ukraine war.

understanding the war. Petryna exposed the colonial and racist nature of the war, with the Indigenous people of Russia being dispatched to the front lines of battles “to serve a Russian far-right nationalist agenda” (2023:14). Thus, the perspective of the Indigenous people and minorities are important to understand the Russia-Ukraine war, particularly in the context of the migrations within and from Russia. This study focuses on the developing situation in Mongolia where the Buryats, as a Siberian Indigenous and minority group historically and linguistically related to the Mongols, have immigrated from Russia.

We pose the following research questions: (a) How have the Buryat people emigrated to Mongolia after the mobilization decree?; (b) How has the Mongolian society received these migrants?; and (c) What has been the experience of asylum seeking for the Buryat and how are they adapting to their life in Mongolia? Through these questions, we to evaluate the impact of the war on the inter-ethnic relations between two related Mongolian peoples.

Interviewing in Ulaanbaatar

The authors of this study are from different disciplines: Takakura is a social anthropologist specializing in Siberia, particularly, the Sakha (Yakut) and Tungusic peoples; Horiuchi is a historian specializing in the Qing dynasty and an expert of Mongolian studies; and Byambajav Dalaibuyan is a sociologist specializing on sustainability in Mongolia. The disciplinary strengths of each of the authors were used to gather primary data through semi-structured interviews. We employed Mongolian, Russian, English, and Japanese languages during the interviews. Horiuchi and Takakura conducted field interviews in Ulaanbaatar for two weeks in June 2023, whereby the former met with the people onsite and the latter took part in the interviews through online participation. Takakura and Byambajav conducted onsite interviews in Ulaanbaatar for one week in October 2023. Takakura was a main interviewer, and either Horiuchi or Byambajav supported him during the process. Before entering the field, we asked the local coordinators, who are/were our close colleagues, to seek permission from local government officials and select the interviewees, that is, Mongolian supporters of the exodus from Russia and asylum-seeking Buryat migrants. Most of the interviews were conducted in offices, universities, cafeterias, and restaurants in Ulaanbaatar, or online in the case of those who lived outside the capital. The average interview time was one to two hours. A total of 52 people were interviewed, either individually or in groups.

An interview guide was prepared with questions agreed upon by all three coauthors. Though we used this guide, we also emphasized the flexibility of the interview questions, based on the informants' responses. While preparing for the interviews with the local coordinators, we recognized the need to interview teachers at the university

and language schools as they are involved in visa-related processing for immigrants from Russia. Our inquiries were conducted with four groups of persons: government/administration officials, educational organizations/teachers, NGO workers and activists, and asylum-seeking migrants.

Our first interviews involved those associated with the government. We tried to understand the administrative challenges in the face of the sudden exodus from Russia and gather information about the basic statistics on immigration, labour, residence, and social welfare. Our second set of interviews, involving educational organizations and teachers, focused on the reason why Russian citizens enrolled in the language learning programs and the provisions for special programs, if any, and evaluation of their learning and communication with other students. Our third target was staff at the supporting NGOs and their activists. We inquired about the history of the organization or the life history of the activist, and the reasons behind the support extended and the programs developed for immigrants. Our final set of interviews involved Buryat migrants from Russia, with the focus on their personal stories, the way they came to know about the mobilization decree, how they decided to escape, the route of migration, and how they adapted to conditions in Mongolia. Kaihko (2022) advocates the use of ethnography to understand war and the ambiguities associated with it, bringing to the fore the grey areas, giving a human face to war, and comprehending sufferings at the personal level. Thus, we tried to uncover individual behavior and thoughts, both on the part of Mongolians and Buryats.

Here we introduce six interviews: one with a teacher at a language school, three with activists supporting migrants from Russia, and two with asylum-seeking Buryats. As our research is in progress, this article gives a preliminary overview of the interviews. We carefully read the content of each interview and roughly discerned a few positions in the behaviors and thoughts of the interviewees. Further research is necessary to comprehend the complex background of the migration to Mongolia in the context of this war.

Voices from Mongolian society

Voices from the NGO 1ROOT

The video speech of 24 September 2022 of former Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdor (2009–2017) is one of the strongest expressions of Mongolia's reaction to the decree of mobilization in the Russia-Ukraine war. Disseminated through the social networking service Telegram, the speech described the situation of the ethnic minorities of Russia as cannon fodder and declared: "The Buryat Mongols, Tuva Mongols, and Kalmyk Mongols have suffered a lot [...] We, the Mongols, will meet you

with open arms and hearts.”³ This message can be interpreted as an expression of pan-Mongolian nationalism.

One of our interviewees was Purev⁴ (in his 30s), an activist of the NGO 1ROOT. We met him twice, in June and October 2023, in the exhibition room of the NGO’s office in the presence of his colleagues.

He said that the purpose of this organization is to protect the “human rights of the Mongolian people, including those outside Mongolia.” He opposed the Russian conscription of the Mongolian people in the Russia-Ukraine war because he believes that the Mongolian people in Russia are not treated as human beings. In the beginning of March 2022, Purev and his friends started to protest with Ukrainian flags in public; soon, groups with opposing opinions attacked them physically, with police support. Since then, they have organized demonstrations in Sükhbaatar Square and elsewhere in the city center, and in the front of the Russian embassy in Ulaanbaatar almost every week, amounting to a total of 65 demonstrations by 15 June 2023. Several photos adorned the room, some showing their protest activities in public, others taken from the internet showing United Nations conferences on the war where the position of the Mongolian government had been shared and the views of some Western and Japanese politicians against the Russian government were presented. They use these photos to explain to their visitors their activities in chronology.

Another member, Gerel (in his 30s), described 1ROOT as an umbrella organization consisting of like-minded small groups established after Putin’s decree of mobilization on 21 September 2022. He explained that the Russian government had ordered their embassies in different countries, including Mongolia, to forcibly return Russian citizens who emigrated during the war. However, once Russian citizens have legally entered Mongolia, forced repatriation is viewed as a violation of human rights and is illegal. Gerel emphasizes this to be the reason behind these protests. The main activities of this group are: (1) public protests; (2) petitioning to the government and administration (particularly for visa-related issues); (3) providing humanitarian aid to the immigrants from Russia, such as finding accommodation and job; (4) helping individuals to emigrate to a third country; and (5) language support in Russian. This NGO held a press conference on 27 July 2022, at which it declared the following: (1) it demanded the Mongolian government to announce via written documentation that the Russian citizens would not be forcibly repatriated to Russia; and (2) it called for all Mongolian people (in Mongolia) to support the Russian citizens who are not only historically and linguistically related ethnic minorities, but also “white Russians” who left their country because of the war.

3 <https://t.me/uaobozrevatel/50201>; <https://odessa-journal.com/public/the-ex-president-of-mongolia-invited-the-buryats-tuvans-and-kalmyks-to-flee-to-his-country-from-mobilization> [accessed 21.12.2023]

4 The names of all interviewees have been changed to protect their identity.

The logo of this NGO comprises the national flags of the Mongol, Buryat, Tuvan, Altay, and Kalymyk peoples. The name of the NGO itself indicates why this activist supports the Russian Buryat.



Fig. 1 The flag of NGO “1 ROOT” which includes five historic-linguistically related nations.

A Volunteer historian

One feature of support activities for the immigrant Buryats from Russia in Mongolia is the role of universities to solve the visa-processing and other related issue for the migrants. Russian citizens can enter Mongolia without a visa for 30 days. This is a critical reason for why many choose to escape to Mongolia. However, once they have crossed the border, the Russian citizens face the challenge of visa acquisition for long-term stays. The universities and language schools in Mongolia are providing assistance in this process. Some universities have started special courses for Russian migrants so that they can enroll to obtain student visas, which guarantee legal stay in Mongolia for a year.

Ochir (in his 30s) is a young historian affiliated with the Mongolian National University of Education and the Chinggis Khaan Museum. He believes that the Buryats are brothers of the Mongolian people, and thus, he should help them. However, he would help anybody who needs assistance under similar circumstances. In the autumn of 2022, he first identified Buryats in Mongolia when hearing someone speaking in Russian on the street. One day, a colleague from a private university informed

him over a call that his “younger brothers” (later known as friends) had come from Russia and needed help to procure visas.

In early October 2022, Ochir met these five Buryat migrants at the central square of Ulaanbaatar. Four of them, seemingly in their 40s, spoke only Russian, whereas the youngest one, Naran, in his 20s, communicated with him in Mongolian and in English. They were brothers from Ulan-Ude, the capital city of Buryatia, where their parents still resided. They had escaped to Mongolia after the mobilization was announced and feared the risk of conscription or imprisonment if they returned. They had questions about student visas and the extension of their stay in Mongolia. Ochir took them to his university because it has a Mongolian language program for beginners. The tuition fee was 6 000 000 MNT, which they could not afford. Thereafter, Ochir informed them of two language schools with cheaper tuition and guided them to the admission office. This was the extent of his assistance. He was not aware of their decision and situation until recently, when Naran contacted Ochir to inform him that he was working as a chef and that the others were employed in Ulaanbaatar after they got their visas by enrolling in a language school.

Ochir does not consider his actions as “heroic” or difficult but rather views them as simple things he could do to assist these immigrants. He eventually helped them find apartments, provided food, paid for their taxi rides, and shared useful employment related information, by himself, without the assistance of any NGO. How other Mongolians support the Buryats was not his concern. Ochir “did his duty” because his colleague had asked for his help. The war was the Buryats’ concern, but because they had come to his country, it was his responsibility to help them. He was satisfied with this involvement. He regards the Buryats as similar to the Mongols in terms of their outlook and behavior, with the only hurdle being language differences, which caused some difficulty during his volunteer activity.

Ochir reflected that one of the reasons of his involvement with the Buryat migrants was his visit to Buryatia more than ten years ago to participate in an international academic conference. He visited a large Buddhist temple and discussed Mongolian politics with a priest, who sprinkled cow milk (an offering for peace) for the Mongols every morning and told him that the Khalkha (Mongols) and the Buryat were one and the same people. This led to a change in Ochir’s attitude: he began to believe that the Mongol and the Buryat are siblings, although the latter are losing touch with their language and culture.

The role of the Mongol-Buryat Cultural Association

The next interviewee is a key figure among those trying to help migrants from Russia get visas. A cultural leader, successful businessman, and local politician in his 30s, Timur is an ethnic Buryat of the Mongolian Republic. We met him in June and October 2023. While the Buryats are an ethnic minority in Russia, their geographical dis-

tribution covers not only the Baikal region of Russia but also northern Mongolia and China. The Soviet demarcation of national border with strict immigration control divided this people into two states. Timur comes from a family of herders in the Dornod province of Mongolia.

Timur noticed on social media platforms that several youths from Russia had immigrated to Mongolia a few days after the Russian decree on mobilization. An acquaintance from Buryatia also called to inform him that the son of a friend was moving to Mongolia and needed support. Timur organized a meeting with his friends and colleagues from other NGOs involved in helping the Buryats. One such NGO is the Foundation of Free Buryatia based in New York. Though the NGOs shared their limitations that would prevent them from assisting all immigrants, the discussion pointed toward three common strategies. First, lobbying was necessary for visa assurance to secure the stay of the Russian citizens. Second, an information center should be established. Timur could successfully assist in the first two cases. The third task was lobbying to improve the labor conditions of the migrants from Russia, but this did not succeed.

Timur and his colleagues sent a petition to the government to modify the rules for granting visas or residential permits, which were given individually and not based on groups. Due to his past career and the enthusiasm of many volunteers, the Mongolian government adopted a new policy allowing foreign migrants entering Mongolia without a visa to change their status and receive a visa. The government also asked Timur and his group of volunteers to disseminate this information instead of making an official announcement, considering the diplomatic sensitivity of Russia. This policy was partially helped by COVID-19 related measures: the Mongolian parliament had passed the resolution that until December 2022, foreign citizens could change their visa type in Mongolia without having to leave the country, to avert the spread of COVID-19. Timur believed this decision to be constructive humanitarian aid by the Mongolian state to the asylum-seekers from Russia.

In the course of various supporting activities, Timur met ethnic Russians, Buryats, Kalymyks, Sakha (Yakuts), and Tuvans. He found that the initial migrants from Russia were affluent people who had foreign passports and high levels of education. Most of them soon left Mongolia for third countries, such as South Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Israel, and the USA.

His initiatives also led to the foundation of the information center for Russian migrants in downtown Ulaanbaatar in October, 2022, which would run for six months. It disseminated accurate information about visas, housing, food, hospitals, money exchange, remittance, lawyers, and other kinds of support. Mongol and Buryat volunteers living in Ulaanbaatar managed this center, and some Buryats who had escaped from Russia also helped with the activities.

Reflecting on his supporting activities, Timur did not consider it “hard work”; rather he was glad to expand his friendships and associations. He recalled the Mongolian proverb – “the more acquaintance, the better.” Many persons from Russia have

similar attitudes toward the crisis. However, he was cautious because the exodus from Russia has impacted the Mongolian society both positively and negatively. He was fearful that too much support for the Russian Buryats could endanger Mongolia.

Experiences of migrant Buryats

We interviewed twelve Buryat migrants from Russia. Their stories provided important testimonies on how they came to know about the Russian government's decision on mobilization, their migration to Mongolia, and their adjustment to their new life. All of them initially found the circumstances difficult due to differences in language and living conditions; some expressed anxieties for the future, and others shared their interpretation of the mobilization and ethnic minorities. We share the stories of two of these Buryat migrants, one of whom is from a city and the other from a village.

Visual creator's perspective

Khurlee, in his 30s, formerly was a visual creator working for a Russian TV company. He is unmarried, and his parents are pensioners in Buryatia, with whom he keeps in touch regularly through social media. When we met in June, he blurted out to us that he could not put up with the mobilization; he regarded it as a form of repression repeated in history. The last repression happened 100 years ago. According to him, both the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist Great Purge were similar in terms of the suppression of Indigenous people. He emphasized that such repression was currently taking place once again. He has made films based on these ideas.

The mobilization decree issued on 21 September was a surprise for Khurlee. The entire city of Ulan-Ude was panic-stricken. While talking to his parents and friends, he realized that the situation was similar to past repressions. The next day, protest demonstrations took place in Theatre Square in downtown Ulan-Ude. As the Russian government had prohibited political meetings, he sensed the risk of arrest and decided to escape from Russia.

The exodus of Buryatia reached its peak between 21–23 September 2022. Several people fled toward the border. Khurlee reached Ulaanbaatar on 30 September by bus from Ulan-Ude, via Kyakhta and Sukhbaatar. His was a solitary escape. Fortunately, he found a Mongolian friend in Ulaanbaatar whom he had met seven years prior. This person had a cottage where Khurlee was invited to stay for a month with other immigrants from Buryatia. After one month, Khurlee needed a visa to continue staying there; he got the “visa for visiting a relative” with a help of some of his connections. During this time, he made his living by putting up videos on YouTube. He had no fulltime job but he volunteered for the NGO “Global Foundation.”

This was Khurlee's first visit to Mongolia. Initially, he could not differentiate between Buryatia and Mongolia. Soon he recognized that Mongolia has a democracy, without state security and political repression. He found Mongolia to be a reliable neighbor state. He also noticed the similarities in terms of food and festival-related cultures. When he moved to Mongolia, many local people treated him with kindness by helping him with food, money, and job. He occasionally even got free taxi rides. The sole difficulty was the barrier of language. As he did not speak Buryat, he faced difficulty finding a job in Mongolia, although some people supported him financially via YouTube.

Rural mechanic

Munkh (born in the 1980s) works as an automobile mechanic in Ulaanbaatar; he is originally from a village in the eastern part of Buryatia. We met him in Ulaanbaatar twice, in June and October 2023. He is single, with no children, and only a sister, as his parents have passed away. Thus, he was not hesitant to escape from Russia. On the day of the mobilization, his friend called, asking if he had seen the news on YouTube. First, he could not believe what was happening. The government announced exemption from conscription only if a citizen was more than 30 years old or has more than five children. He felt cheated by his experience of military service in the past and decided to escape. He took some clothes in his backpack and his passport and left his village on 26 September.

Many migrants from Russia chose the direct north-south route from Ulan-Ude to Ulaanbaatar via Kyakhta and Sukhbaatar, as in the case of Khurlee. However, Munkh chose the eastern route through the Dornod province because of the geographical proximity to Mongolia. Munkh walked from his village to Solov'esvsk, a Russian border town and crossed the border on foot to Ereentsav, a Mongolian border town. He then took a car with five unknown migrants to Choybalsan, the capital of the province. Thereafter, he traveled on to Ulaanbaatar.

Arriving at Ulaanbaatar, he contacted a female acquaintance with whom he had studied in Moscow. This person kindly supported him for the first month. Eventually, he discovered that a maternal relative of his lived in a village in the northeastern part of the province. He contacted her; she invited him to live with her. Munkh could speak Buryat fluently and he did not have much difficulty adjusting. Several of his friends with families who had emigrated from Russia returned to Russia after a month. Their chief complaint was that the income in Mongolia was not enough to support their family in Russia. As Munkh had no wife or children to support, he decided to stay longer. After staying in the village for a month, he moved to Ulaanbaatar to get a visa. With the help of a volunteer, he chose the university with the lowest fee to get a student visa.

After getting the visa, he found a job at a dairy farm in a village close to the Russian border in the Selenge Province. He had studied at an agricultural college in St. Peters-

burg and had prior work experience. He worked on the dairy farm for four months. The manual labor was difficult for him. He then moved back to Ulaanbaatar to work at a car wash for three months, and began working as an automobile mechanic, which was his job when we interviewed him. The job at the dairy farm was recommended by a volunteer organization, but the next two jobs he found by himself.

Although he speaks Buryat, the first several months was a challenge for Munkh because the Mongols speak their (Mongolian) language “too fast,” which he found difficult to understand. When working at the dairy farm in Selenge, he would only speak Mongolian, which helped him adapt. Excepting the low salary, he did not feel much cultural difference there. He emphasized that Mongolia is “safe” (*spokoinaia*) and an easy place to live. In Russia, the government had prohibited all kinds of political meetings and activities for the past 10 years. However, life in Mongolia was without any worry of conscription and authoritarian orders. If he did not speak in the street, people assumed he was a Mongol. If he said something, he was asked about his origin, to which he replied “Buryatia” – and everyone understood. Otherwise, he was considered Mongolian. He does not intend to go back to Russia but rather hopes to stay and start a family in Mongolia.

Discussion

The following can be deduced from the stories of our interviewees. The Mongolian public’s reaction to the Russian exodus is complex and is intertwined with historical, cultural, political, and geopolitical significance. Some political and public figures publicly expressed their support for those who escaped the mobilization and reached Mongolia. Ordinary citizens and volunteer organizations also carried out grassroots support activities. The reasons for their support are complex and diverse, ranging from compassion and humanity to memories of ethnic repression to a connection based on common Mongolian roots. There is also fear and discontent regarding the extent to which the support activities may endanger Mongolia’s national security.

The stories told by our interviewees, both Mongolians and migrants, suggest that the support activities were carried out in three different forms. President Elbegdorj and the 1 ROOT Movement illustrate political and symbolic forms of support. These forms of activities relied heavily on the power of social media and made the impacts of the war on the ethnic minorities in Russia highly visible to the Mongolian public. The rationale for this support is based on pan-Mongolian nationalism.

The second form is grassroot-level support activities carried out by organizations and groups motivated by a sense of Buryat, Kalmyk, or other ethnic identity and cultural connections. Some of these organizations existed before the Russia-Ukraine war and supported cultural heritage and social networks of the ethnic communities in Mongolia and abroad. Some groups formed after the mobilization to provide sup-

port services to new migrants from Russia. Services included: supplying information about visas, study opportunities, and jobs; providing temporary accommodations and jobs; and teaching Mongolian. Though networks among the Mongolian Buryat people are strong and formalized, the support services provided by them were uncoordinated and informal. Unlike the publicized form of support, these groups are less engaged in the political discourse of the war and pan-Mongolism.

The last form is individual support activities. We emphasize the temporary, ad-hoc, and relaxed nature of humanitarianism among most Mongolian people rather than the enthusiastic one of the first form. The individuals who extended support in their personal capacity may empathize with the pan-Mongolian narrative disseminated on social media, which could be a reason behind their involvement in supporting the asylum-seeking migrants. However, these individuals were mostly following a moral imperative of supporting people in need, which is entrenched in Mongolian cultural ethics. Thus, the Mongolian proverb rings true: “A friend’s quality will be known in times of trouble.” An article on the web read: “People may have noticed that young people who came from Buryatia, Chita Region, and Tuva bordering Mongolia are walking the streets a lot. We want to help these people with Mongolian generosity.”⁵ Many Mongols sympathized with the immigrated Buryat and willingly provided their support in their own way. However, people were also aware of the importance of stable relations with the Russian government. Pro-Russian activists were in confrontation with the anti-war movement, and people are in general rather afraid of the national disagreements on this issue.

In recent years, pan-Mongolianism has been expressed by celebrities and artists as an imagined community. Popular country singer Samand Javkhan and various hip-hop artists have expressed solidarity based on a common ancestry and connectedness. However, this topic has been politically sensitive and unpopular. There are obvious geopolitical risks to Mongolia associated with such discourse. Pan-Mongolian nationalism did not capture the mind of most individuals who engaged in the supporting Buryat immigrants. This complexity is contrasted by the enthusiasm in Poland, where more than 77% of the population oppose the current Russian imperialistic invasion due to their historical past of being invaded by Russia (Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023b: 18; Sato 2023). We emphasize that at least three different positions have emerged in Mongolia regarding this war-related mobility, which reflects a different geo-politics in Northeast Asia.

The stories of the Buryat migrants in Mongolia highlight diverse lived experiences. These migrants chose Mongolia as a destination to escape the conscription for several reasons. First, the proximity and the ease of entry were important. Some migrants went to Mongolia to subsequently move to other countries. Second, the migrants used social networks established through personal connections such as kinship, co-work-

5 <https://www.urug.mn/news/19117> [accessed 21.12.2023]

ers, and schoolmates, and based on socio-economic linkages between Mongolia and Russia. Third, Mongolia was perceived or found by some migrants as a democratic country with less surveillance and much less political repression, if any. It is difficult to conclude whether the migrants considered their ethnic connections with the Mongolian people and the potential support from the Mongolian public based on this connection when they decided to move to or stay in Mongolia.

The lived experiences of the Buryat migrants point to the importance of language. Many Buryat migrants speak only Russian, which is now spoken by a very small segment of the Mongolian population. Under the education and cultural policy in Russia, many young Buryats in urban areas are not able to learn Buryat. Some migrants shared that they intend to migrate to Russian-speaking countries, such as Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan, because of the language barrier in Mongolia. Indeed, one of the main activities of the Mongolian support groups is teaching the Mongolian language.

Previous studies on the ethnicity of the Buryat people in the late 1990s showed that many Russian Buryats rejected the notion of Buryat-Mongol commonality based on the common language ancestor, as a result of the seventy-plus years of Soviet nationalist policy (Watanabe 2010: 162). Our preliminary research indicates the limited impact of the pan-Mongolian ethnicity among the Russian Buryats on their movement across the Russian-Mongolian border during the war. They retained their ethnic identity regardless of their proficiency in the Buryat language, but the pan-Mongolian identity did not capture their imagination.

Conclusion

This study offers an ethnographic analysis of the mobility caused by the Russia-Ukraine war and its impact on the inter-ethnic relations between Mongolia and Russia. We confirmed that the Russian Buryat citizen exodus across the Mongolian border impacted Mongolian society, government, civil society, and individuals. We identified at least three different clusters of support for the migrants: spectacular pan-Mongolian nationalism, cautious Mongolian Buryat compatriotism beyond state borders, and widespread individual empathy for person in need. The clusters are spontaneously formed individually and do not associate with each other nor are they institutionalized. They reflect the geo-politics of Mongolia in a post-socialist setting, where the government carefully balances its relations with Russia, China, Japan, and “Western” states.

The Russian Buryat migrants chose Mongolia as an asylum country because of its geographical proximity. Their routes across the border were diverse, informed by regional histories and kinship relations. Some faced language difficulties, which caused self-reflection on the historic-linguistical connection of the Buryat and Mongolian languages. Individuals who speak Buryat tend to adapt better in Mongolia. But even these persons can have a strong feeling of difference of the culture and

society compared to that of their home in Russia. The sense of difference is important because it creates a gap in the communication among the Russian Buryats, pan-Mongolian nationalists and their Buryat compatriots in Mongolia. The movements across the Russian-Mongolian border related to the war evoked compassion based on the historic-linguistic connections of Mongol-Buryats to various degrees in Mongolia, but these feelings of affinity did not deeply affect the Russian-Buryat migrants.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all the interlocutors who accepted our requests for an interview, and the coordinators of our field research in Mongolia. This research was financially supported by National Institute of Humanities (NIHU) Global Area Studies Program, East Eurasian Studies Project (FY2022-2027) and by Center for Northeast Asian Studies, Tohoku University.

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