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Urban imaginaries of post-2022 Russian emigrants on Telegram: negotiating belonging and affective attachment in Yerevan, Buenos Aires, Herceg Novi, and Belgrade

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the digital narratives of Russian emigrants who left the country after 2022, focusing on how they construct urban imaginaries of their host cities on Telegram. Drawing on four publicly accessible Telegram channels (from their creation in 2022 through April 2026), it explores representations of Yerevan, Buenos Aires, Herceg Novi, and Belgrade. The corpus broadly reflects the sociological profile of the post-2022 emigration wave: urban, highly educated, and relatively affluent. Using narrative analysis, the study identifies recurring themes and rhetorical strategies through which emigrants make sense of their new environments. Particular attention is paid to everyday topics such as weather and seasonal rhythms, sensory impressions of urban space, gastronomy and food practices, encounters with host-community members, and the gradual cognitive mapping of the city. These brief, episodic sketches, addressed to online audiences, produce dynamic and evolving urban imaginaries that are neither fixed nor purely individual but co-constructed through circulation within diasporic digital networks. The findings show that these imaginaries emerge through an ongoing negotiation between emigrants and place. A key dimension of this process is affective: as narrators move beyond tourist perspectives and engage with the city's everyday routines and less visible spaces, they develop forms of place attachment, articulated through the interchangeable use of "falling in love" with the city and "feeling at home." Sensory familiarity, personal landmarks, and humorous encounters with locals all contribute to this transition from displacement to dwelling. While integration into local communities may remain limited, attachment to the urban environment becomes a crucial resource for reconfiguring belonging and constructing new, place-based identities. Urban imaginaries thus function as affective and symbolic tools for negotiating displacement and re-establishing agency.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a wave of emigration from Russia. Although estimates of the size and distribution of the post-2022 diaspora remain uncertain, ranging from 800,000 to 1 million people (Bouchet, 2024; Krawatzek & Sasse, 2024), due to the rapid pace of movement and the lack of comprehensive official data, available evidence provides insight into its key characteristics and preferred destinations. This diaspora is highly fluid and often described as being in a "state of flux". Migrants frequently relocate between countries, and even returns to Russia may function as strategic, temporary retreats to regroup, secure resources, and prepare for renewed emigration. For some, organizing a subsequent departure can take years rather than months, which underscores the cyclical and unpredictable nature of these migration trajectories (Kamalov & Sergeeva, 2024). According to the Re: Russia Project (2024), at least two-thirds of this population resides in countries bordering Russia to the south, including Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, while other common destinations include Israel, Germany, Serbia, the United States, Spain, and Argentina (Bouchet, 2024).

This new wave of emigrants is notably younger, predominantly male, highly educated, and more affluent than the general Russian population, with many transferring significant financial assets abroad (Inozemtsev, 2023). They are largely urban and globally oriented, characterized by cultural adaptability, digital literacy, and familiarity with international mobility and higher living standards (Ibid.). While maintaining strong ties to Russia (Kamalov et al., 2025), they simultaneously seek to establish roots in their host societies by building social networks, everyday routines, and practices of home-making. Digital technologies play a central role in this process. Online communities such as Telegram and Facebook groups, as well as personal blogs documenting migration experiences, enable individuals to sustain connections, negotiate belonging, and construct meaningful narratives within highly mediatized and transnational digital environments.

The abrupt and, for many, constrained nature of post-2022 emigration from Russia also shaped the choice of destinations. Rather than being guided by lifestyle preferences or long-term aspirations, relocation decisions were often driven by practical considerations, such as visa-free entry, the relative ease of obtaining legal status, and affordable living costs (Jerstad & Barrosa, 2024; Amiryan & Sokolova, 2022). In some cases, destinations were determined by employers offering relocation options, with the alternative being the loss of employment. As a result, cities such as Yerevan, Belgrade, or Buenos Aires were not necessarily perceived as inherently desirable but were selected as viable and accessible points of entry. By emigrants' own accounts, many departed with only a vague understanding of what awaited them, relying heavily on information circulated through social media and migrant networks (Zejnulahović et al., 2024). This initial lack of familiarity often rendered their early encounters with the host environment uncertain and, at times, fraught, shaping a complex and evolving relationship with the place of destination.

Some emigrants created personal blogs on social media to document their migration experiences. Beyond practical uses, these blogs function as spaces for meaning-making, community building, and therapeutic spaces for grappling with the hardships of displacement. Many left Russia abruptly, without time to prepare for the personal, professional, and social consequences of migration, and some explicitly describe their blogs as safe spaces "for whining" or venting about disrupted routines, lost careers, and shattered plans. While this exodus shares features of voluntary migration, elements of constraint complicate

its classification. For many, leaving Russia marked a profound biographical disruption, involving the breakdown of established careers, urban lifestyles, and social networks.

These blogs also serve as sites for negotiating and renegotiating identity. Emigrants confront the difficulties of building a new sense of self as outsiders in unfamiliar societies, balancing the retention of Russian cultural, social, and linguistic ties with the need to adapt to host environments. Through blogging, they construct narratives that allow them to reflect on their past lives, manage uncertainty, and explore new forms of belonging. This process is closely tied to their relationships with the cities in which they settle. As emigrants navigate everyday life in new urban environments, they develop evolving forms of attachment, perception, and imagination that shape their sense of place. Examining these dynamics through concepts such as sense of place, place attachment, and urban imaginaries provides a framework for understanding how migrants experience, interpret, and inhabit their host cities.

Conceptual and methodological framework

Conceptually, this study draws on a set of interrelated concepts that explain how individuals relate to places, including sense of place, place attachment, and urban imaginaries. Sense of place refers to the subjective meanings individuals or groups assign to geographic locations (Rezeg et al., 2025) or, as Edward Relph defines it, "the ability to grasp and appreciate the distinctive qualities of places" (Relph, 2006, p. 19). It is a multidimensional concept encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral relations to environments, which vary in intensity and valence (Gillespie et al., 2022). Classic formulations, such as Tuan's notion of topophilia (Tuan, 1990), emphasize the affective dimension of place experience, highlighting attachment through familiarity, belonging, and sensory engagement. As Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) note, space becomes place when it acquires emotional and functional significance, thereby contributing to spatial identity.

In the context of migration, however, such meanings are not pre-given but actively produced. Entering a new urban environment involves a gradual process of learning, interpretation, and adaptation, through which migrants develop affective and cognitive bonds with unfamiliar surroundings. Migration can therefore be understood as a process of reconfiguring both identity and spatial belonging, as individuals translate everyday experiences of displacement into evolving attachments and urban imaginaries (Koirala et al., 2025).

Place attachment overlaps with sense of place but places stronger emphasis on the emotional bond between individuals and meaningful locations (Williams & Vaske, 2003). It can also be understood more broadly as the interplay of affect, knowledge, and behavior in relation to place (Low & Altman, 1992). These bonds emerge through repeated interactions and lived experience, gradually acquiring symbolic significance and contributing to place identity, understood as the incorporation of place-related beliefs, values, and emotions into one's sense of self (Proshansky et al., 1983). For migrants, place attachment is particularly significant because it becomes central to processes of homemaking, belonging, and ontological continuity in conditions of displacement. It provides both emotional grounding and practical orientation in unfamiliar environments, thereby shaping how migrants negotiate stability, identity, and wellbeing in new urban contexts (Sieng & Szabo, 2023).

Urban experience is shaped not only by attachment but also by embodied and sensory engagement. Cities can be understood as rhythmically structured spaces produced

through routines, movements, and social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991). Practices, for example, walking, function as key modes of perceiving and interpreting urban space, generating knowledge, affect, and attachment (Wunderlich, 2008). In this sense, experiencing place is inherently affective and embodied (Duff, 2010). The figure of the *flâneur* captures this attentive and reflective mode of urban exploration (Benjamin, 2006). Migrants' everyday movements through the city similarly generate sensory impressions and meanings, which are later translated into narrative form.

We argue that emigrants' narratives contribute to the production of urban imaginaries, understood here as evolving, interpretive frameworks through which individuals perceive, evaluate, and represent urban environments. Such imaginaries are not fixed. Upon arrival, migrants often encounter dissonance between expectations and lived realities, prompting an ongoing renegotiation of meaning. Urban imaginaries therefore emerge through the interaction of prior assumptions and situated experience, continuously reshaped through everyday encounters and reflections (Koirala et al., 2025).

The digital dimension extends these processes. Migrants transform their lived experiences into online narratives that circulate within diasporic networks, contributing to shared representations of specific places. This "*digital sense of place*" encompasses social media interactions and mediated representations that both complement and reshape physical experience (Dai & Liu, 2024). Together, these practices participate in the ongoing production of place identity and collective urban imaginaries within transnational communities.

Methodologically, this study is based on a qualitative analysis of four personal Telegram channels created by Russian emigrants after 2022. The channels vary in size, ranging from approximately 1,000 to 15,000 followers as of April 2026, and broadly reflect the sociological profile of the new emigrant wave, which is urban, highly educated, and relatively affluent (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2024). Each channel explicitly addresses the experience of emigration and was actively maintained from its creation until 1 April 2026. Although not exclusively focused on particular cities, the blogs deal with lived experience in urban contexts as the narrators describe and devote significant attention to their host cities – Belgrade, Yerevan, Buenos Aires, and Herceg Novi.

All channels are publicly accessible (no invitation link is required to view their content) and regularly updated. While they include interactive features such as comments and reactions, this study does not analyze comment sections. All materials were originally published in Russian and translated into English by the authors, and channel names have been anonymized for ethical and safety reasons.

The analysis adopts a narrative approach, focusing primarily on textual content. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how emigrants construct and articulate their experiences, identities, and relationships to place over time. Although each blogger has a distinct narrative voice and thematic focus, there are recurring patterns, themes, and representational strategies shared by some or all of the narratives in question. These patterns form the primary analytical focus of the study.

The guiding research question is: How do post-2022 Russian emigrants construct urban imaginaries of their host cities on Telegram, and how do these narratives reflect processes of negotiating belonging and affective attachment? Following the conceptual and methodological section, the study proceeds with empirical analyses focused on representations of weather and seasons in host cities, sensory impressions of the urban

environment, gastronomy and food practices, encounters with locals and urban landscapes, and concludes with a discussion of the main findings and their implications.

Experiencing the city through weather and seasons

Although each narrative reflects a highly individualized journey and a unique process of constructing a personal topography of the host city, a number of recurring themes can be identified across the material. These themes often emerge through short, everyday sketches that emigrants choose to share in their blogs. One such recurring motif is weather. Descriptions of weather in the host city are frequently juxtaposed with memories of weather in their home cities, sometimes explicitly inviting followers to share their own impressions. Seasonal changes and atmospheric conditions become a continuous source of attention and reflection. The fact that weather itself becomes "tellable", that is, worthy of being recorded and shared, suggests that it is not perceived merely as a neutral backdrop. Rather, it actively shapes the narrator's experience of the city and their affective state, becoming part of the process through which the unfamiliar environment is observed, interpreted, and gradually made meaningful.

These narratives construct a distinctive portrait of host cities through attention to weather patterns and seasonal change. The unfolding of the yearly cycle, marked by shifts in temperature, light, and atmosphere, is closely intertwined with observable transformations in the urban and natural environment. Bloggers note, for instance, the blooming season of mimosa, the onset of the tourist influx along the Adriatic coast, periods of intense summer heat, or the beginning of the heating season accompanied by smog in Belgrade. These temporal rhythms are further punctuated by local celebrations and festivals, such as the Mimosa Festival in Montenegro or Vardavar in Armenia, which become integrated into emigrants' experiential calendars. Through such recurring observations, the city is experienced not as static but as temporally layered and rhythmically changing. These seasonal and festive markers become key reference points in the narrators' accounts, shaping their sensory and emotional engagement with place and contributing to their evolving urban imaginaries.

Emigrants who remain in the same location gradually accumulate an intimate knowledge of the city's rhythms, including seasonal changes, weather patterns, and the local calendar of festivals and events. In their narratives, key temporal markers are not only their emigration "anniversaries" (e.g., "it's been two years since we arrived in Yerevan") but also recurring observations of seasonal and weather cycles. This knowledge allows narrators to form expectations about the environment and express surprise or curiosity when these expectations are disrupted, noticing "anomalies" in the usual patterns ("In the third year, I began to get used to things, and suddenly Yerevan experienced a snowy winter. Of course, it snowed everywhere, but in Yerevan, it felt especially remarkable."). These accounts are often enriched by references to the locals, confirming that the events or deviations that emigrants observe are quite ordinary or, on the contrary, anomalous.

> I just read that the Moscow Department of Transport is urging residents to avoid traveling around the city because it's very hot outside (+33°C). It's funny how we laugh at southern countries when everything seems to fall apart at zero degrees, yet we ourselves are afraid of the heat.
>
> In Belgrade, temperatures above 30°C started at the end of April and didn't let up until I left at the end of May. Everyone kept warning me that this was only

> the beginning – that the real heat would come in July, and in August I would find out what hell really feels like. And yet, no one stops going about their business in the city. You pull on a hat, put on your sunglasses, and head off across Belgrade to wherever you need to go. The main thing is not to forget to turn off the air conditioner before leaving the house – otherwise the electricity bill will be so high it'll make your head spin.
>
> Herceg Novi is wonderful on winter days, but after a thoroughly heated Moscow, I found myself freezing at home today. It's +11°C outside, +21°C inside, with 53% humidity indoors – and I'm still cold. I've been working at the computer all day, so I've now turned on all the wall heaters and set the air conditioner to heating mode.

The blogs operate between two poles: the familiar, grounded in repeated everyday experiences, and the exotic, which highlights novelty and difference. This tension reflects the transitional nature of early migration: elements of the host city gradually become familiar while others are still framed as unusual. Bloggers strategically foreground this contrast in a way reminiscent of travel writing, using it to maintain audience engagement. Attention to weather and seasonal change further structures urban imaginaries temporally, producing a cyclical rather than linear sense of time organized around recurring atmospheric and seasonal rhythms.

The city as sensory impression

The impressionistic sketches of moving through the city are rich in sensory description, including visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile experiences. Rather than relying on a "tourist gaze" or an "Instagrammable gaze", that is, the selective focus on recognizable landmarks or photogenic sites, narrators foreground other sensory dimensions. Attention shifts to ambient sounds, subtle visual cues, smells, and bodily sensations, such as the abrupt chill of being splashed with cold water on a hot day during Yerevan's Vardavar Festival ("Vardavar is a unique festival, making you crave hot tea and socks even at +42°C. Exhausted, soaked, frozen – it's just awful. Next year we'll go again"). This emphasis produces a more embodied and situated experience of the city, where it is lived and felt rather than merely observed, contributing to the formation of personal urban imaginaries and affective attachments to place:

> Belgrade smells of hot leaves. It's very hot here.
>
> Sometimes you can smell something burning outside because of the heating. You walk and think – fire? No, probably just the heating. Then you look closer, and see smoke rising from the first floor. No, you think, that's definitely a fire; I should call the fire brigade. You watch carefully – no, it's just some café that opened, everyone's crowded inside, smoking.
>
> Everything is in bloom and fragrant; the tropical relative of our bird cherry has blossomed, turning the sweet note of its scent up to the maximum. The effect is lovely.
>
> A new country, a new soundscape. The leaves rustle differently here. When the wind swayed the top of a palm tree, at first I thought it was raining. And just imagine what sounds would accompany you if you decided to watch a TV series on your balcony back in Russia in the evening?
>
> In Herceg Novi, the scene was like this:
>
> The loud, joyful cries of Montenegrin children, "Aide! Aide!"
>
> The neighbor (again) vacuuming or drilling
>
> Instead of swifts, bats (!) flying around
>
> The scent of the sea

> And just now. Right this moment. Behind me. At the Cascade, the FOLK DANCE FESTIVAL has started. It's hard to express the sheer excitement I feel. What were the chances that I would go out to work calmly and immediately stumble into a damn festival of damn folk dances? Everyone is running, dancing, and shouting; folk music is playing. And Armenian folk music – well, it always includes the zurna. Do you know what a zurna is, my friends? It's an amazing, one-of-a-kind instrument, memorable not least because you cannot ignore it, even if you were dead. The zurna hits straight into your bone marrow and fills you from the inside with the desire to live. Even if only by sheer force.

Each narrator constructs a distinct sensory portrait of the host city, carefully describing its smells, sounds, and textures. This is a dynamic process in which sensory experience and emotional interpretation mutually reinforce one another, gradually shaping place attachment over time. As this attachment deepens, even initially unpleasant sensory elements, such as the smell of smoke during Belgrade's winter or from cigarette smoke in public spaces. It may come to be perceived positively or as part of the city's familiar atmosphere. In this way, sensory impressions contribute to an evolving and increasingly intimate relationship between newcomers and the urban environment.

Gastronomy and place-making

Another key theme in the narratives is food and eating. All of the channels feature typical lists of "must-visit" restaurants or announcements of new eateries, a common genre across emigrant channels and chats. They also aim to serve an informational function by alleviating fellow emigrants' concerns about the availability of good food in their location, especially in more distant or unfamiliar settings such as Buenos Aires ("There are dozens of types of cheese and sausage, excellent meat of every imaginable kind – beef heart, tongue, pork knuckles, tenderloin. Right there in the supermarket. Dozens of kinds of chilled ravioli with all sorts of fillings, less than 100 rubles a pack"). Narrators pay close attention to local culinary practices and habits, as well as to the challenges and surprises of sourcing familiar Russian ingredients or visiting establishments opened by fellow Russian emigrants. This close attention to food and eating contributes to the construction of gastronomic maps or, to put it more precisely, gastronomic imaginaries of the host cities.

Encounters with food extend beyond consumption: buying groceries, navigating markets, or eating out becomes a site for interactions with the host community. These interactions are not always smooth, yet they provide rich material for storytelling, allowing emigrants to reflect on cultural differences, negotiate their place in the city, and share humorous experiences with their followers. At the same time, narrators often highlight unexpected points of commonality with local eating habits, such as a shared love for khinkali, which complicates simple distinctions between "familiar" and "foreign":

> If you start reading reviews of restaurants and deliveries in Yerevan, about 80% are dedicated to khinkali. Hipster-relocants with pumpkin lattes love them, as do the local serious folks in suits and boots, and children of all ages. People go eat them in large groups, with family, or alone. A few days ago, my friends flew to Yerevan from Russia. Of course, for lunch we went to the restaurant famous for its khinkali. We waited for the khinkali, photographed the khinkali, divided the khinkali, and ate the khinkali. They ate, I didn't. Most other customers were also eating khinkali, even though there's tons of other food on the menu.

Numerous occasions for storytelling arise from the clash between emigrants' expectations, shaped by life in large Russian metropolitan cities where diverse cuisines and a wide range of eateries are readily available, and local habits in host cities where such diversity may not exist on the same scale ("The veterans are already rolling under the table, while the newbie has no idea what he just asked. He might as well ask why the local store doesn't sell black tea. Seriously, he's already been to three stores – where's the black tea?").

As emigrants strive to maintain their urban or "hipster" lifestyles in a new environment, the discrepancy between their expectations of what "normal" food or "normal" eateries should be and the gastronomic realities of host cities is often treated with humour. One blog, for example, describes the Serbian preference for meat, which can transform even classic Asian dishes into localized Serbian versions, while also offering an equally humorous account of a new Russian emigrant café in Belgrad:

> Honestly, I really like the cafés opened by Russian emigrants here. [...]. The food is excellent, the interiors are great, the people are friendly, and overall these are nice places. These are the kind of Moscow-style hipster cafés in emigration. And all of them have very funny menus. They obviously created them by making a list of everything Moscow IT people love but can't find in Belgrade, or that would taste strange. [...] Voilà. [...] Tom Yum with shrimp, okroshka, chebureki, hummus with nachos, khachapuri ....
>
> The Asian restaurants themselves are also peculiar. Once in a Japanese place, they loaded the miso soup with bacon – more bacon than seaweed. Apparently, it was meant as a compliment from the chef; they must have been embarrassed to serve the guest just that bland tofu water, so they decided to feed them properly. For the really health-conscious, there are "healthy food" restaurants. You can smoke in them like anywhere else. You walk in and think – fire? What's happening? Has someone called the firefighters already? No, everyone's just smoking. But they have healthy food in abundance: gluten-free carrot cake, cucumber smoothies, eat up, it'll supposedly help you live to 100.

Alongside descriptions of emigrant cafés catering to compatriots' tastes are humorous accounts of sudden cravings for familiar food that emerge even for items to which migrants were previously not strongly attached. The search for such familiar dishes often takes the form of a "quest" narrative, in which attempts to obtain the desired food culminate either in success or in failure. These quests also prompt emigrants to explore previously unknown locations, such as specific shops and food outlets, thereby expanding their knowledge of the urban landscape:

> Even more surprisingly, I found myself missing vareniki at the store! In Yerevan, the ready-made options are delicious, plentiful, and fresh, but almost always filled with meat. I wanted simple potato vareniki. I tried everything in the local Belarusian stores – spoiler: not only was it bad, it was barely edible. Luckily, I didn't try the pumpkin latte back then – I would have been embarrassed.

Visiting eateries and purchasing food also serves as an important point of contact not only with local culture more broadly but also with local residents (a theme that will be explored in more detail in the following section):

> Once, a few blocks from our apartment, I saw a cozy old lady selling a little bit of everything, with cabbage neatly packed in small bags. I approached and asked: "May I have some cabbage, please?" – "Of course, *jana*, of course," she smiled. "So,

> cabbage, garlic, lemon – three thousand drams!" She looked at me in a motherly manner. The lady looked about 100–150 years old, and my conscience wouldn't let me say I didn't want the rest. Fine, I thought on the way home – I'll use the lemon and garlic elsewhere, and buy cabbage next time. In the evening, we sat down for dinner, and I realized that this was, no joke, the best cabbage of my life. Perhaps the patron saint of sauerkraut sold it to me that morning in the guise of a grandmother. Dima and I ate half a kilo without clinking glasses, and the next morning I went back to the lady. (the story goes on to tell how the narrator returned to the same old lady for her cabbage many times again but was still too embarrassed to confess that she didn't need lemon and garlic and kept buying those as well).

Thus, digital narratives reveal a pivotal transition in the emigrant's construction of the urban imaginary: the shift from the tourist gaze, which consumes the city as an aesthetic spectacle, to a migrant's labor of dwelling (see T. Ingold (2000)). Narrators move beyond the superficial "exotic" adventure and into the realm of embodied practice. These sensory reports record the efforts of the self to become inscribed into the new environment. In this context, the physical and the sensory become a means of radical adaptation. Following the Kantian tradition where space and time function as the necessary forms of sensibility, the emigrant's struggle with new seasonal and diurnal rhythms, outdoor and indoor temperature regimes, atmospheric qualities and smells, and the re-wired muscle memory of hilly or flat cityscapes is, fundamentally, an effort to reconstitute the conditions of their own existence. The focus on these experiences in digital narratives reflects the process of becoming a new "embodied self" in a new place and emphasizes that the urban imaginary is not merely a mental map, but a visceral, rhythmic synchronization between the body and the host city.

Encounters with host communities: from oddness to familiarity

Much of the communication among new Russian emigrants occurs within diasporic communities, as many find integration with local populations difficult or are reluctant to pursue it (Amiryan & Sokolova, 2022). In the early stages of migration, language barriers (though less pronounced in post-Soviet contexts) and the challenges of settling in often lead to limited engagement with locals. Encounters with host communities are therefore relatively rare but highly salient. They are frequently recounted in detail on blogs, where narrators share experiences of surprise, enjoyment, and occasional frustration or awkwardness.

Alongside accounts of encounters, the blogs also include observations of local habits, cultural practices, and everyday peculiarities, often presented in contrast to life in Russia. These reflections reveal the emigrants' outsider perspective, marking aspects of the host culture as notable, surprising, or worth sharing with a Russian-speaking audience (certain features are clearly marked as "exotic", such as, for example, Serbians' habit of smoking everywhere). Through both encounters and observations, the urban landscape is experienced as a transitory, in-between space: the emigrant is no longer (or was never) a tourist, but not yet – or perhaps never fully – a local. These fleeting social and cultural interactions, coupled with attentive observation, contribute to the construction of personal urban imaginaries and shape the emigrants' evolving sense of belonging.

> [...] older people in Belgrade look well-off. In Moscow, it's hard to leave the house without encountering beggars or miserable pensioners. In Belgrade, I don't see that. The local older people are lively, dress decently, buy proper food, and

> don't fuss over every penny at the checkout. In the *kafanas,* spirited old ladies chat about who has passed away and who has married for the fifth time. The depressive Russian vibe is absent, even though salaries and pensions are in the typical depressive Russian style.
>
> I suspect there's a law in Yerevan prohibiting the wearing of hats. Or maybe it only applies to locals and doesn't affect repatriates and emigrants. It was -13°C outside in the morning! Everything is covered in snow. And so? Only the kids and I were wearing hats.

Another popular genre of emigrants' notes consists of humorous sketches in which the naïve or unsuspecting migrant becomes familiar with local urban practices, often resulting in embarrassing or simply amusing situations. The relatively limited number of explicitly "unpleasant" surprises in these blogs may reflect the particular interpretive lens adopted by the authors, in which the local community is often portrayed as inscrutable yet generally friendly and hospitable. For instance, the blogger writing about Buenos Aires recounts another emigrant family being robbed at home and subsequently leaving the country, while emphasizing that nothing similar happened to their own family and that such incidents are exceptions rather than the rule. Encounters with locals are thus incorporated into an overarching narrative of "successful" emigration, in which eventual integration and adaptation function as the implicit endpoint. Quite illustrative, therefore, are the following two sketches describing the narrator's encounters in Yerevan:

> Yerevan, my darling. So gentle, so open, and so beautiful in the summer, of course – but that's not even the most important part. The most important part is that I was walking home with my groceries when a butcher literally jumped out at me. He leaped out of his shop and started yelling at me. And even though he was shouting in Armenian, I could understand perfectly from his gestures and intonation what he meant: "Who carries bags like that?! Don't you see everything's all crooked? You're squashing the figs and don't even notice! Give them here, for heaven's sake; what a mess, your mother should be ashamed!" He took all my bags, emptied them, repacked everything, tied them up, put them into his beautiful bag, and hung it on my arm. At the end, he even waved his hand at my thanks, so I would understand that he only did it out of respect for the figs.
>
> I went to a pharmacy today. [...]
>
> – "*Barev dzez*," says the pharmacist, "you absolutely must check out our cosmetics! We have really good cosmetics – French, therapeutic! Very effective for... all of that." makes broad circular gestures around my face
>
> – "*Merci shat*," I say, "but I have my regular cosmetics; I don't switch, I only use them."
>
> – "Well, you can tell," the pharmacist replies, with a knowing smile.
>
> I laughed so hard I thought they'd have to carry me out of the pharmacy. Only in Yerevan do they manage to violate personal boundaries with such charm.

The construction of the urban imaginary relies as much on navigating interpersonal "friction" as it does on physical adaptation to climate or topography. By documenting these moments of boundary-crossing – whether through unsolicited help or reciprocal ironic exchange – emigrants transform the "exotic" other into a familiar, albeit still distinct, social partner. Ultimately, these narratives move the emigrant beyond the detached observation of the outsider, using humor and social contrast to perform a symbolic "inscription" of the self into the host city's complex cultural fabric.

Mapping the city: attachment and urban knowledge

In their daily movements around the city, emigrants often navigate its "backside" or "underbelly," which presents a remarkable contrast to the polished, official façade visible to tourists. By moving through these less visible spaces, emigrants develop intimate knowledge of the city's streets, corners, and everyday rhythms, which brings them closer to the locals and sets them apart from tourists and newcomers. A recurring rhetorical device is, therefore, to contrast the negative emotions that the same location may provoke in outsiders with the narrator's delight in having come to know the place, highlighting both the city's distinct personality and the comforting sense of familiarity and belonging ("A friend on Facebook recently moved to Belgrade. She really tries to speak politely and not be too blunt, but sometimes something slips through. She writes: "Just five meters away from the center and the slums begin." She attaches a photo of the slums. I look at the slums and think: "Belgrade, my love, can't wait to get there! This is so cool, just like in the photo! Love it! What a city, I'm gonna live in Belgrade, can't wait to come back!").

On the other hand, unlike locals, emigrants often notice details that residents take for granted, and their narratives frequently document these small discoveries. For example: "On my 670th day in Herceg Novi, I discovered yet another of the thousands of little staircases that make this wonderful city famous! I wonder how many more I'll find – and when I'll have discovered 100% of them?" This reflexivity of the emigrant gaze is evident in other observations as well; for example, regarding street names, the narrator living in Belgrade notes that some buildings display plaques listing all previous names of a street, showing that it has been renamed three times in less than ten years, as circumstances changed, which makes her wonder about the Serbian way of naming streets and the historical conditions that led to the practice of multiple renaming or keeping all the names at once.

This intimate engagement is further emphasized through the narrators' use of photographs, either taken by themselves or, more rarely, shared from others. In the blogs, these images are often described as capturing the core or essence of the place, highlighting the narrator's sense of having true, intimate knowledge of the city. The narrator presents themselves as possessing the expertise and authority to point out these details to their audience, while simultaneously inviting those members of the audience who are "knowledgeable" (that is, having been living in the city long enough and sharing in their fascination and familiarity with the place) to contribute their own interpretations of what the city is *really* like.

As daily routines take them along the same routes, certain signs, buildings, and other elements acquire personal significance, gradually forming each narrator's unique topography of the city ("I've developed favorite spots, favorite foods, streets I enjoyed walking down, and some personal landmarks – like, "Oh, the 'Fuck NATO' graffiti, that means the shoe shop is just one block away."). New experiences intertwine with older memories, creating an individual history of the emigrant's relationship with the urban environment. In some cases, certain elements of the urban landscape or feelings associated with them come to feature prominently as defining motifs of the city's imaginary: e.g., fountains in Yerevan, graffiti in Belgrade, staircases in Herceg Novi, or the sense of freedom conveyed by the wide streets of Buenos Aires.

Another recurring motif is the layered history of the city; traces of the past, which sometimes are barely visible beneath newer constructions, allow narrators to reconstruct their own version of the city's and country's history:

> I read just yesterday that Belgrade has been seized and destroyed 38 times. Moreover, each time, it rose from the ashes with all its streets, verandas, and cheerful spirit intact.
>
> [...] Belgrade has really interesting architecture: you walk down the street, and suddenly it's Italy, indistinguishable. Turn the corner – and you're in Istanbul. Over here, we have Austro-Hungarian chic. Here are the traces of NATO bombings. And that wall? We stand there and discuss who among the Yugoslav criminals actually was a criminal and who wasn't.

Emigration inevitably prompts the narrators to compare their own journeys with those of earlier waves of Russian emigrants, particularly when they encounter traces of these predecessors in the landscape, or with the broader history of global emigration, revealing the shared emotions and challenges common to all emigrants:

> I'm not very strong with historical parallels, but I want to share a thought: Buenos Aires, for me, is in many ways reminiscent of New York about a hundred years ago. Back then, it was a magnet for those disillusioned with Europe, looking for a new home, ready to start from scratch. The world is different now, of course. However, there's still that overseas remoteness, the openness to immigrants (it's even enshrined in the Argentine Constitution), other freedoms, the blue sky... And the way I perceive the Russians I interact with—some lost, others determined and purposeful, many babies, many arriving with their families. A local community with its own culture is taking shape. [...] That's roughly how I imagine the wave of immigrants who arrived in the U.S., and now, spring has begun here, and it feels as if new hopes are hanging in the air.
>
> The Savinsky Monastery, at the very top of the mountain [...] It's very touching that they have preserved these graves of Russians. Most were buried between 1928 and 1942; I haven't seen any later ones. In 1942, some were shot by the fascists. So, almost exactly 100 years ago, these people arrived here, mostly from the 1870s, but also from the 19th century. History repeats itself. Online, I found biographies of many of them [...] Besides the military, a few doctors are buried there too, though I couldn't find any information about them. What an unsettling coincidence – I am the daughter of an officer and the wife of a doctor. The same types, in the same place.

Comparisons are also frequent in emigrant narratives, either with their home city, such as noticing the relaxed, "*dacha*-like" atmosphere of a small Montenegrin town compared with bustling Moscow, or with other cities they have visited, such as New York or Barcelona. While these comparisons often highlight positive aspects of the new place, for example the narrator in Buenos Aires noting how relaxed and free people seem compared with war-time Moscow, they can also reveal notable absences, showing what the host city lacks relative to the home city, and evoke feelings of nostalgia:

> I saw comments from people who had moved from Siberia, the Urals, or the central regions to Armenia or Georgia, saying how terribly they missed a snowy winter [...] I read them and thought, how lucky I am that I don't miss anything – only the people. But after a while, I realized that I really missed "big water." In Rostov, you always know that the Don River is nearby – you can see it, smell it, the city is built on it. In Yerevan, there's no big water; it's completely different, not about that at all. [...] I suddenly felt with my whole being that I needed to go, sit, and watch a river with a lot of water flowing.

The home city–host city dichotomy is emotionally charged and features prominently in many of the narratives, particularly as the narrators make trips back to their home cities (Moscow in three of the blogs), which they describe in some detail. It should be noted, however, that this dichotomy is far from straightforward. The host city is contrasted not only with present-day Moscow, which can feel both painfully familiar and strangely menacing, but also with pre-war Moscow. Paradoxically, this comparison brings the memory of the pre-war city closer to the emigrants' experience of the new city:

> Inexplicably, life here has become very similar to what it was before in Moscow. Of course, before 2022.
>
> We went to a nice café for dinner. Furthermore, that nostalgia stayed with me constantly – the feeling that the two of us were carefully peeking into the past – Moscow in the early 2000s.
>
> Recently, Vika and I have discussed several times a very important advantage of Argentina for us. It is that it has, in a way, frozen in the past. Life here, unlike in many other countries, is less influenced by modern technologies and has little digitalization. It feels like a different pace of life. I used to think this was something to suffer over, because it contrasted so sharply with Moscow. [...] However, it turned out that I really enjoy living as if in the past. And raising children here is very pleasant.

The pre-war home city is remembered with nostalgia. At the same time, the wartime urban space is portrayed as alien and no longer home, as narrators recount military banners in the streets, tense interactions with friends and neighbors, drone attacks, and other visible 'signs of the time'. In this context, the host city emerges as a new and welcoming home, offering the emigrant safety, comfort, and respite, so that returning from Moscow already feels like 'coming home' ("Now I say "I'm going home" meaning Herceg Novi. It's a little unsettling to realize that Moscow is no longer "home," and I'm still resisting that – though not so desperately anymore"). Still, the home city remains in many ways a reference point, for example, in terms of prices, crime rates, weather, or access to services – a perspective that may be shaped in part by the audiences to whom the narratives are addressed, often composed of former or current residents of the capital.

The narrators' relationship with the city tends to be described in affective terms, reflecting the evolving, personal history of their life in this place. While not all narrators recount their initial impressions, some describe a gap between their first encounters and the feelings they developed after spending time in the city. For instance, initial fear or disorientation may later give way to fascination and a sense of familiarity. This is how one of the narrators describes her first months in Belgrade:

> I went through all of this back in March. I remember rushing around rainy Belgrade between bank branches, mobile phone shops, the police station, and the post office, and feeling like I was in hell. I told my friends that this city was perfect if you wanted to go crazy, get high on heroin, or write your own version of [Maxim Gorky's] "The Lower Depths", but for anything else, the city was terrible.

In yet another posting, she writes: "Belgrade just seemed to me like the kind of city where it would be easy to get hit on the head with a crowbar."

The same narrative features what might be called an "epiphany" moment, when fleeting daily impressions of the city suddenly sparked a sense of recognition and affection, described by the narrator as the moment of "falling in love" with the place ("There was this sudden spark – I physically felt myself fall deeply in love with this city. I can't remember the exact moment I fell for all of the men in my life. However, with Belgrade,

I remember everything"). Yet another narrator confesses feeling "in love" with the city immediately after he arrived there: "I expand my boundaries of acceptance when I meet people who, like us, moved from Moscow but aren't at all thrilled with Argentina and Buenos Aires. I'm surprised, I try to listen calmly without starting an argument. I'm in love with everything here. Literally, no "buts."'. The relationship with the city is metaphorically compared to a relationship with a person, involving elements of familiarity, surprise, attraction, and attachment. The first narrator also explicitly connects the moment of falling in love with the city to the sense that it is now home – a powerful, sudden realization of attachment and newly found belonging.

Sometimes, the process of developing attachment to a place is not depicted as a sudden "falling in love," but rather as gradually "catching the vibe" of the city, tuning into its rhythms, mood, and distinctive atmosphere. This involves noticing subtle, hard-to-define qualities, the *je-ne-sais-quoi,* that make the place unique, memorable, and ultimately endearing. For instance, the narrator, describing her experience of settling down in Herceg Novi, reflects on how she gradually adjusted her manner of dress as she attuned to the city's relaxed atmosphere. She also characterizes the place's unique "personality" with the Russian word *intelligentny* (refined, cultivated), a term typically applied to a person rather than a place.

A recurring reflection found in several blogs is that emigrants often thought they could only love their home cities, but after experiencing the new place and "falling in love" with it, they realize that they can love other places as well and make home in them – an experience that proves deeply empowering for them:

> The fact that I've settled in Herceg Novi – is that my personal ability to find beauty everywhere and fall in love, or is it the magic of this particular place, where I happened to end up by a twist of circumstances? Will my life be just as wonderful after the next move, or will I ruin it and end up biting my elbows, wondering – why did I leave?
>
> I have a feeling that we are finding a home. Buenos Aires has become familiar. I can get around pretty well, I can reach anywhere by public transport, I can ask for directions, and I'm not as afraid as I used to be of strangers – or even people I know (I mean, I'm not afraid of small talk like "¿Qué tal? Todo bien").

Through the intimate mapping of "backside" spaces and the identification of personal landmarks, the emigrant's urban imaginary evolves from detached observation into a deeply personalized topography of belonging. The city is no longer a site of refuge but an empowered reconstruction of home.

Conclusions

The narratives of Russian emigrants settling in new cities reveal their complex and evolving relationship with urban space. Unlike long-term residents, emigrants carry no extensive history in the city, yet they are far from mere tourists: their engagement is both affective and active. Even in moments of routine, they pause to notice and record impressions, transforming everyday encounters into digital narratives shared with online audiences. Blogs serve simultaneously as archives of memory and as vehicles for emotion-imbued urban imaginaries. Place attachment develops through both attentive observation and embodied experience, as knowledge of the city is gained through walking its streets or navigating via taxis.

The affective dimension of these narratives is central: for the narrators, loving the city is inseparable from feeling at home, safe, and comfortable. Emotional, cognitive, and functional bonds coalesce into a sense of belonging and topophilia, illustrating the dynamic interplay between place attachment and place identity. By exploring the city and building a personal topography, emigrants create symbolic and corporeal connections that anchor them within the urban environment.

The digital form of the narratives amplifies this process. Fragmentary Telegram posts, often accompanied by photographs or videos of the place, capture episodic encounters with the city, its inhabitants, and its urban landscapes. Material sites, everyday events, memories, and reflections are interwoven into a mosaic that represents both the immediacy of lived experience and the broader temporal and historical context of the city. In doing so, these digital accounts function as instruments of urban imaginary, enabling emigrants to narratively construct and negotiate the city as a meaningful space, simultaneously personal and shared.

Through these narratives, the city becomes a source of support and empowerment, a platform for re-established agency and control over one's life. Engagement with the urban environment allows emigrants to reconstruct their identities in a new context: while they may not become fully assimilated as Serbs, Argentinians, or Armenians, and at the time of writing do not appear particularly inclined to do so, they may nevertheless develop localized identities as Belgradians, Porteños, or Yerevanians. This process highlights the role of place attachment and urban imaginaries in fostering belonging, providing both psychological and social resources that help migrants navigate displacement and participate in the cultural life of their adopted cities. By sharing their impressions with online audiences, narrators also contribute to the ongoing circulation and co-construction of urban imaginaries within digital diasporic spaces, thereby participating in the emergence of shared representations such as diasporic Belgrade or diasporic Yerevan.

In sum, place attachment, place identity, and urban imaginaries are, for these emigrants, lived, practiced, and narrated phenomena — formed through embodied exploration, affective engagement, and reflective storytelling. The Telegram blog emerges as a distinctive genre in which displacement is not merely endured but actively reworked into a new sense of home.

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