

A SHAMEFUL PAIN THAT MAKES YOU DIFFERENT:

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IDENTITY-BUILDING
PROCESSES AMONG
RUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN
KYRGYZSTAN

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This paper presents the results of ethnographic field research conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2022 and 2024. The reasons for the emigration of Russian citizens from Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be broadly understood as political. In the vast majority of cases, these reasons involved some form of political statement—even something as simple as the refusal to participate in the conflict. Based on approximately 20 in-depth ethnographic interviews I conducted with *relokanty*, Russian war migrants in Kyrgyzstan, I aim to develop two claims in my presentation. First, ethnic Russians fleeing from Russia to Kyrgyzstan undergo a process of rapid ethnicization. They distinguish themselves from everyone else: the local population, local Russians, and also the Russians who remained in Russia. Second, one of the factors that unites this group internally is a specifically understood pain. This pain is existential in nature, and it is neither understood nor shared by others. The way my interviewees articulate this pain leads to a reinterpretation of what it means to be Russian today and may signal the emergence of an alternative Russian political identity.