# Whose City Is It? Migrant Women, Domestic Labour, and Invisible Urban Belonging in Moscow

## Authors

Liya Chechik

## Discipline

Cultural Analysis

## Abstract

This essay explores the invisible infrastructures of migrant women's labour that underpin everyday life in Moscow. Focusing on Pamiri women from Tajikistan who work as domestic care-givers for the city's cultural middle class, it traces how their presence shapes urban belonging and challenges post-Soviet hierarchies of visibility. Through a situated, reflexive approach informed by feminist and decolonial methodologies, the essay weaves together personal narrative and ethnographic observation to reveal how care networks, emotional reciprocity, and informal solidarities sustain both migrant families and Moscow's creative economy. It argues that these women are not passive participants in global precarity but active agents who quietly remake the city through their daily practices. In doing so, the essay reconsiders what it means to "belong" in a postcolonial metropolis where the boundaries between insider and outsider, host and guest, employer and employee remain fluid yet deeply consequential.

## Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Russia has become one of the major destinations for labour migrants from Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). This post-Soviet migration process has a complex and multilayered structure: from the early waves of forced resettlement in the 1990s, due to local conflicts resulting from the fall of the Soviet empire, to the economically motivated migration of the 2000s and 2010s. Russian anthropologist Sergey Abashin views this trend as part of a broader demographic transformation tied to a postcolonial shift, when former peripheries begin to supply labour to the centre of the former empire (Abashin 2021). Simplified visa procedures, shared Soviet legacy, and cultural proximity have turned migration into a widespread and even routine practice.



Figure 1: Project In the Cold by Ksenia Diodorova, 2013

In Russian society, migration occupies a paradoxical position. It forms part of the state agenda, which controls the narrative and turns it into a trigger for public discontent. At the same time, the liberal agenda, which in other countries traditionally advocates for migrants' rights, barely touches on that topic. Even intellectual circles that position themselves as progressive and civic-minded rarely engage seriously with migration or with the hostility it provokes as a subject of reflection. The few voices that do speak out belong to individual activists, yet they are easily drowned out by the broader, turbulent information landscape. The one NGO that did advocate for migrants' rights, the Civic Assistance Committee led by Svetlana Gannushkina, was among the first ones to be declared "foreign agent" by the Russian government in 2015.

Against this silence, levels of xenophobia and racism remain alarmingly high (Mukomel 2013; Levada 2019). In the context of the current foreign policy climate, domestic migration issues are often perceived as secondary, 'not urgent enough', or simply irrelevant. And yet, these seemingly 'invisible'" issues have a profound impact on everyday life, shaping how labour is organised, how cities function, and how social relations are reproduced. To ignore migration is, in effect, to ignore the very structure of contemporary Russia.

Migrant labour not only transforms the lives of the migrants themselves, but also reshapes the urban fabric wherever they settle. Moscow and Saint Petersburg witnessed the emergence of inexpensive cafés and upscale restaurants serving Uzbek cuisine, the rise of migrant neighbourhoods, and the development of new forms of urban coexistence where economic interests, cultural practices, and conflicts of belonging intersect. As a result, the lives of those residing in these areas, migrants and non-migrants alike, are subject to transformation.

Even though academic texts on migration from Central Asia to Russia increasingly address women's experiences, this focus remains limited compared to the broader scholarship on migrant transnationalism. Sherzod Eraliev and Anna-Liisa Heusala (2021) note that women's stories remain marginalised in migration studies and list the main ways they are typically framed in the literature. To their inventory, I can add that the growing number of women migrants is often interpreted as a by-product of the expanding service sector and the rising demand for nannies, caregivers, and domestic workers (Tyuryukanova 2011; Gorina, Agadjanian & Zotova 2017; Kozlova, Bedrin & Neklyudova 2024). This shift is usually described as a transformation from purely labour-driven to family-oriented migration and accompanied by an emphasis on the female cohort's dual vulnerability,

as both migrants and women (Rocheva&Varshaver, 2017). They constitute only 17–19% of the migration flow from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and often find themselves in especially precarious situations, both in domestic life and on the labour market (Florinskaya, 2021).

The Central Asian-Russian experience is situated within the wider academic discourse on female migration, a discourse which often reproduces a rhetoric of deficit, dependency, and marginality. Women's migration is frequently portrayed as a secondary, reactive phenomenon, a 'forced' consequence of external demand and the cultural conservatism of sending countries. Such narratives emphasise the painful dimensions of migration, highlighting women's experiences of discrimination, low labour-market participation, and lack of institutional recognition (Norman & Reiling 2024).

### Between Insider and Outsider: A Situated Approach

My essay reflects on the experiences of a group of Pamiri women migrants who have been living in Moscow since the mid-2000s and examines their impact on the everyday lives of the urban middle class. Particularly, women working in the cultural sector during the 2010s and early 2020s, a period marked by intense cultural initiatives and debates in the city. Focusing on the story of one family, I trace how their daily labour and care practices weave an unseen yet durable fabric of Moscow's social life. I argue that women migrants are not merely passive recipients of these transformations but active participants in remaking Moscow, thereby challenging dominant narratives that cast them solely in terms of vulnerability, passivity, or victimhood.

I am less concerned with questions of legal status or formal adaptation strategies, areas already extensively explored in the scholarly literature (see Dave 2014; Abashin 2017; Kubal 2019), and more focused on these women's ability to sustain families, build relationships with children and employers, and create informal yet remarkably effective systems of support and care. This represents a distinct form of female migration that falls outside conventional legal categories and therefore calls for a different analytical language that has yet to be fully developed. These women are not simply family members of labour migrants accompanying their husbands, nor are they marginal domestic workers passively absorbed by the service economy (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2012). They are autonomous actors who support their families, both in Russia and back home, and construct stable, if often invisible, forms of social infrastructure.

I am not an anthropologist. My academic background is in art history, where I was trained to work with visual sources and representations of the past. Yet, through personal circumstances, I became entangled in an

"Women's migration is frequently portrayed as a secondary, reactive phenomenon, a 'forced' consequence of external demand and the cultural conservatism of sending countries."

unexpected web of relationships with one particular Pamiri family. Guided by curiosity and a habit of close observation, I found myself reflecting constantly on what I saw and learned through our communication and shared experiences. I had no intention of 'entering the field', yet I realised that I had. In this sense, I became a kind of post-facto anthropologist: the field emerged the moment involvement and shared life took hold. Where does 'the field' actually begin? Can one refrain from formal fieldwork and still be inside it?

This positionality—part insider, part outsider—shapes my voice throughout this essay. My approach is informed by feminist and decolonial methodologies that value situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and autoethnographic reflection (Hemer 2023), recognising that knowledge is produced through embodied, relational, and ethically charged encounters. Later, I return to this reflexive stance to consider what it means to 'be in the field' unintentionally, and how personal entanglement can become a source of critical insight. To protect the privacy of my interlocutors, I have changed all the names of the Pamiri protagonists.

## From Hiring a Nanny to Entering the Field

In Russia women are officially eligible for maternity leave that can last up to three years. Many take advantage of this policy, especially when the second parent is able to provide financial support. However, a significant number of mothers, either by choice or necessity, return to work much earlier. In such cases, childcare is typically taken over by relatives, most often grandmothers, or, if the family can afford it, delegated to a nanny.

Social stratification becomes particularly visible in the context of finding a nanny. I have repeatedly encountered the notion that a nanny should be 'Russian', whatever this may mean: striking expressions of everyday racism often surface in hiring domestic workers, renting out apartments, or other similar situations. Classified ads specifying that housing is only available to individuals "of Slavic appearance" remain widespread and deeply troubling.

The phrase 'Slavic appearance' ('slavyanskaya vneshnost') is a racialised category common in Russian everyday discourse. It signals a preference for light skin, European facial features, and often lighter hair and eye colour, markers implicitly contrasted with Central Asian or Caucasian phenotypes. This terminology functions as a form of coded exclusion: a way of policing access to housing and employment without explicitly naming ethnicity or nationality.

The wealthiest families tend to hire nannies through agencies: childminders from the Philippines are considered especially chic, so that children can be exposed to English from the earliest age. But far more often, caregivers are women from former Soviet republics who come to major Russian cities looking for work.

The search for a nanny is always stressful: entrusting your infant to a stranger feels nearly unnatural. Every mother has her own set of criteria, anxieties, and parenting strategies (Macdonald 2011; Souralova 2015). At this point, I shift from observer to participant: my own family circumstances brought me directly into the networks of migrant women I now describe. When my daughter Kira was just three months old, I was offered the position of Head of Education at one of the major museums in Moscow, an opportunity I could not pass up. My family supported the decision, and I returned to work.

After ten interviews with different candidates, we chose a calm, mature woman, an Ossetian from Tbilisi, Georgia. We connected immediately (I, too, am from Tbilisi), and soon my daughter had another significant adult figure in her life. Two and a half years later our Ossetian nanny decided to return home, not to Tbilisi this time, but to Ossetia itself, a region straddling the border of Russia and Georgia, divided between the two states and the arena of the 2008 war. That meant we had to start the search again.

By then, Kira had become a toddler, and she needed a different kind of care: more play, movement, and imagination. I wanted someone young and energetic, able to keep up with a hyperactive three-year-old. Through a friend's recommendation, I interviewed a 27-year-old woman from the Pamirs. At the time, I knew almost nothing about the region. This encounter, seemingly ordinary, marked the beginning of a five-year immersion into Pamiri life in Moscow, where my roles as employer, later friend, and eventually a researcher gradually overlapped.

Shahzoda spoke little Russian, but she was remarkably kind, charming, and, most importantly, immediately pulled Kira into play. And what more does an almost three-year-old need? We quickly agreed on the terms, and soon Shahzoda began working with us. With her arrival, Kira gained not just a caregiver, but a true friend, ally, and companion. For my part, I found myself becoming part of an extensive, quietly functioning network of mutual support and solidarity that I had not even known existed. As I learned later, many of Shahzoda's sisters also worked as nannies for my friends and colleagues.

Figure 2. Kira, 2017. Photograph by Liya Chechik.

At first, it was just two colleagues and two siblings. Shahzoda's closest sister, Gulfiya, began working as a caregiver for the child of Natasha, a designer we collaborated with on various exhibitions.

But over time, more and more unexpected connections emerged: there were many more sisters and cousins and all of them worked with families of colleagues, friends of friends, professional acquaintances, and even people I had only heard about. What began as an individual hiring decision gradually revealed itself as an entry point into a dense, informal social ecosystem that sustained much more than just my family. More than once, I found myself at gatherings with unfamiliar people, where during the evening I would learn, for instance, that our nannies were actually sisters.

At some point, I realised that Pamiri women had become the invisible infrastructure of Moscow's cultural scene. Their labour enabled curators, architects, and designers to launch projects, open exhibitions, reimagine urban spaces, while their own presence remained largely unacknowledged.

This invisibility has several layers. Middle-class women active in Moscow's cultural sector, including myself, were often asked how we managed to raise children while constantly launching new projects. The answer was that at the core, our success lay a support system of Pamiri nannies. These women are also largely invisible to anthropologists and

demographers as I already mentioned earlier; there is very little literature on their lives or labour. Academic studies often focus instead on migrants' interactions with law enforcement, framing migration through the lens of raids, police harassment, and legal precarity (Round & Kuznetsova, 2021). Women, however, are rarely the focus of this attention: they are stopped by police less frequently, nor are they targeted in anti-migrant raids on construction sites and markets. Thanks to their domestic labour, they dissolve into Moscow's middle class (Gorina, Agadjanian & Zotova 2018). Yet even within this context, they remain visible only as 'functions', as domestic workers, and are rarely acknowledged beyond those roles. Their invisibility is instrumental, tied to the care work that sustains middle-class families. This paradox, being indispensable yet socially erased, highlights the selective visibility through which racialised and feminised labour operates in Moscow.

## Negotiating Identity in a Postcolonial City

The Pamirs are a mountainous region in the northeast of Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan. In everyday Russian discourse, Pamiris are often lumped together with the broader Tajik migrant population. However, they represent a distinct ethnic group with their own culture, language, and religious identity. Most notably, Pamiris are Shi'a Ismailis, whereas the majority of Tajikistan's population adheres to Sunni Islam. This religious difference has made Pamiris a marginalised community even within their own country, where they frequently face discrimination (Zotova & Cohen 2019; Mostowlansky 2024).

The story of Shahzoda's family illustrates a range of diverse migration strategies. Shahzoda's own experience is emblematic of her branch of the clan. This part stayed in their native Badakhshan Autonomous Region until very recently. Shahzoda's parents still live there, while all her five sisters have already moved to Moscow. The daughters left for Moscow to earn money and support their parents. The departure had been postponed for a long time. The head of the family would not allow the girls to move to the big city. But when it became clear that there was no other way to provide for the elders and solve financial problems, the girls were finally allowed to go. Gradually, the sisters moved to Moscow, each finding work as a nanny. Part of their income was sent back to their parents, while the rest was spent on their everyday costs.

By the time Shahzoda's branch of the family relocated to Moscow, another clan was already living in Russia's capital, specifically, the children of her mother's sister. Unlike Shahzoda's immediate family, her mother's sister had been a celebrity, a famous dancer who headed a Pamiri national

Figure 3. Project In the Cold by Ksenia Diodorova, 2013.

dance company. Her children (Shahzoda's cousins) had moved to urban centres, first to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. Yet even there, life soon became economically unsustainable: having a job at all was considered a blessing, and salaries were meagre. Starting from 2006, these cousins, one by one went to live in Moscow, setting the stage for the arrival of Shahzoda and her sisters. They spoke fluent Russian, thanks to the Sovietisation of the region, and had professional training. As one of them, Firuza, put it, they didn't feel like they were moving to a "foreign" country—Russian was their common language, often more fluent than their Tajik, and Moscow still felt like their capital. In the geopolitical context of 2025, it may sound strange or even absurd, but it's a perspective that must be acknowledged when engaging with the post-Soviet experiences of people from remote regions of the former "empire" and their relationship to its capital city.

The Pamiri experience in Moscow reflects both postcolonial conditions and Soviet legacies. Postcolonial, because labour continues to flow from former peripheries to the metropolitan centre in a pattern of dependency and racialised hierarchy. Soviet, because linguistic Russification and hierarchical distinctions between "Slavic" and "non-Slavic" groups persistently shape inclusion and exclusion. The paradox is that Soviet universalism promised equality, yet its legacy entrenched categories of difference that continue to mark Pamiris as peripheral in the twenty-first century (Tlostanova 2012).

"At some point, I realised that Pamiri women had become the invisible infra-structure of Moscow's cultural scene. Their labour enabled curators, architects, and designers to launch projects, open exhibitions, reimagine urban spaces, while their own presence remained largely unacknowledged."

One of the first to move to Moscow was Zulfiya. Upon arriving at the home of her first employer, she introduced herself as Lily. At the time, it seemed that Muscovites would not understand their real names. But very soon, their actual names were brought back into everyday use.

This resonates with what Madina Tlostanova calls the 'flexible change of identities' among Soviet generations of central Asian women: *"from mimicry to strategic positioning at the border, giving a double vision and a multidimensional understanding and perception of oneself in the world"* (Tlostanova 2010, 143). This statement can be applied as well to the generation born under the Soviet regime, but which grew up during the first post-Soviet decades.

The temporary adoption of Russian names such as "Lily" illustrates how Pamiri women navigated cultural expectations and urban stigma. To pass as less 'foreign', they initially suppressed their given names, anticipating rejection or incomprehension from Muscovites. Yet the swift reappearance of their real names suggests both a pragmatic flexibility and a refusal to efface their identities entirely. This shift reveals migrant women's agency in negotiating visibility: they could adapt to linguistic and cultural norms, but also insisted on recognition of their own cultural selves once relationships deepened.

Another example of revealing cultural identity can be found in an episode from our shared life with Shahzoda. Shahzoda had taken ill, and her elder sister called me to say that she would not be able to work for the next few days, that she was lying down, not eating, too weak, and barely speaking. In a calm voice, the sister explained that they would take her to a doctor and would let me know if anything else was needed. Aware of various exorcistic healing practices among Muslim labour migrants, I carefully asked whether they had invited a mullah. After a short pause, which might have signaled surprise at my question, the sister, now with a much more emotional intonation and a rapid, agitated flow of speech, began telling me that yes, a mullah had come the day before, that he had instructed them to recite specific surahs from the Qur'an, and that this should help her recover within a week. It was clear that she had not expected to share this kind of information with me, and she seemed relieved and even pleased that I listened with acceptance and no judgement. Tim Gold (2018) suggests that the role of anthropology is not to interpret or explain the ways of others, but rather taking others seriously, learning from their life experience and commonly finding a way to live. I think that is what happened at that moment. My question, simple as it was, signalled that I was ready to take her world seriously — not as an exotic curiosity, but as a valid framework for making sense of illness and

Figure 4. Project In the Cold by Ksenia Diodorova, 2013.

healing. This shift in our communication felt like a crossing of a threshold: we moved from a strictly transactional relationship (employer–employee) toward something closer to mutual recognition.

The sister's animated response, her willingness to narrate the process in detail, was a sign of trust — and perhaps of pride. It reminded me that sharing knowledge is not only about conveying information but also about affirming one's identity and claiming a space in the shared conversation. My acceptance created a space where such knowledge could be shared. As Pugh and Mosseri (2023) note, trust in ethnography is built gradually and step by step, through reflexive engagement and the slow construction of ethnographic intimacy. In that moment, her religiosity was no longer a private matter to be hidden from a secular employer, but a legitimate part of the story we were co-creating.

Taken together, these moments show that cultural identity is neither hidden nor lost in migration; it is constantly renegotiated. Whether through the reclaiming of given names or the intimate sharing of spiritual healing rituals, Pamiri women quietly assert their presence and agency. In doing so, they carve out spaces of recognition within an often hostile urban landscape, reminding us that belonging is not only a matter of legal status or public discourse but also of everyday acts of self-disclosure and mutual acknowledgment.

## Informal Architectures: Networks of Care in Moscow

But to return to the beginning of the family's story in Moscow: Zulfiya was fortunate. Through word of mouth, she received a job offer and began working for Olga, a Moscow-based editor and cultural officer. This seemingly ordinary arrangement illustrates how informal networks operated as crucial mechanisms of entry for Pamiri women into the urban economy. What might appear as an individual success story in fact opened a pathway for the broader integration of her extended family into Moscow's 'creative class'. Through Olga, Zulfiya's sisters and later her cousins were also able to find employment, revealing how personal connections, trust, and reputation substituted for formal institutional channels and quietly reconfigured the boundaries of cultural labour in the city.

In our case, Pamiri women became informal conduits for horizontal ties within the professional community of Moscow's cultural sector. The children of editors, publishers, media managers, museum curators, architects, designers, and urbanists were being raised by Pamiri sisters. They covered for one another, coordinated schedules, and took children for walks together. Through the kids cared for by our nanny's sisters, my own daughter unexpectedly formed bonds with families I had long hoped to meet myself. Nannies became the connective tissue between our families, our projects, and the daily lives of our children, building closed-loop but transparent circles of trust. It was a parallel reality—unofficial, yet entirely reliable. The state was a background presence, sometimes obstructive, but rarely involved. Everything that truly functioned, we built ourselves. Not through formal systems and regulations, but through word of mouth, personal referrals, and shared experiences. It was a kind of unspoken social contract. We entrusted our children not to institutions or the state but to the nannies, and their labour made the work of Moscow's cultural sector possible.

In turn, this very community unknowingly helped to lay the basis for the flourishing of the Pamiri diaspora in Moscow. It created a paradoxical foundation, both cultural and economic, that enabled these women to build lives and networks of their own.

My own position within these relationships is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, I operated as part of a capitalist system, hiring a woman from an economically vulnerable region to care for my child. On the other hand, I was and still am inevitably embedded in a postcolonial structure, where former 'peripheries' continue to supply labour to the centre, not by mandate, but out of

necessity. But layered over these visible structures is a more subtle element of interpersonal relations. It is not friendship, not partnership, not 'family' in any contemporary sense, but rather a specific kind of bond marked by mutual need and recognition. I would agree with Adéla Souralová who identifies "*emotional recognition*" as a key concept for characterizing the ties between nanny and mother (Souralová 2015, 132). At the same time, my growing anthropological curiosity about this entanglement made it even more special. And, here, it is important to note that this relationship was profoundly reciprocal. Shahzoda and I were both invested in the connection, emotionally as well as practically, which is rare in traditional ethnographic settings where the researcher often seeks knowledge more than the interlocutors seek engagement (Han 2010).

My fellow mothers and I provided Shahzoda's family not only with income and safe working conditions; many of us also helped with legal paperwork, registrations, work permits, and housing. Moreover, we became their guides to life in Moscow, just as Shahzoda's family was always open and generous in sharing their own culture with us. Many of us have already travelled to Pamir and stayed with Shahzoda's family in their house. The situation of the sisters in Moscow varied. Some arrived with their husbands, others with husbands and children. Some left their children



Figure 5. Sunday crowd at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, 2017.
Photo by Liya Chechik.

"Yet even within this context, they remain visible only as 'functions', as domestic workers, and are rarely acknowledged beyond those roles. Their invisibility is instrumental, tied to the care work that sustains middle-class families. This paradox, being indispensable yet socially erased, high-lights the selective visibility through which racialised and feminised labour operates in Moscow."

behind in the Pamirs with their grandparents. A few were unmarried, which meant their responsibilities in Moscow were doubled: not only did they have to support themselves and their families back home, but they also needed to find a husband within the diaspora. This was the case with Shahzoda, and gradually I became involved in the process. The year when my daughter grew up enough to no longer need Shahzoda's help, she got married and gave birth to her first child. A year later, the entire family received the much-coveted Russian citizenship.

Her wedding took place in early February 2022, just before our collective sense of normality collapsed, was held in a large banquet hall on the Moscow Ring Road, a vast highway that once marked the Soviet-era borders of the city. Lining the beltway are dozens of banquet halls and restaurants, each catering to a different national diaspora. For an average Muscovite, these spaces remain almost entirely outside everyday experience. Being welcomed into one of them made me suddenly aware of this parallel urban world.

Our presence at the wedding felt ambivalent. Kira and I were genuinely happy for Shahzoda, our dear friend, yet at first, I wondered if we had been invited mostly out of politeness or obligation, because of all the ways her family had depended on us. It was only later in the evening that I realized our presence was understood as an honour, that they were proud we had found the time to attend. For me, too, it was an honour: for a moment, the question of belonging shifted. I was happy to belong to this community, to be part of such an important milestone in their lives.

## Conclusion

In 2017, the courtyard of the Museum of Moscow hosted a festival titled *Pamir–Moscow: A Festival of Cultures*, organised, in essence, by my nanny's sisters with the support of my fellow mothers. The announcement read: "*Life in a metropolis is impossible without interaction in its many forms, the interweaving of traditions and cultures, the overcoming of stereotypes, and an open conversation about social interconnections in today's contradictory world.*"

But this interweaving didn't happen at diplomatic forums, it happened in Moscow's kitchens and on its playgrounds. It was driven by women, labour migrants, who, with care, patience, and quiet strength, surrounded the children of those shaping Moscow's cultural landscape.

In 2022, many of the families who had employed Pamiri nannies left Russia. The children who had been raised by migrant caregivers now became migrants themselves. Maybe not all of them faced the same level of financial difficulties, but the existential issues of belonging and identity were essentially the same.

Yet they have absorbed a vision of the world built on trust, where the line between 'us' and 'them' is permeable. From an early age, they developed a sensitivity to the diversities and subtle nuances of the world. And for them, this difference is not a source of fear, but of curiosity. They have learned to distinguish and to understand.

Over the past three turbulent years, many intellectuals, especially those who remained in Moscow, have been preoccupied with how the urban land-scape has changed, not just externally, but internally. On the surface, the

Figure 7,8,9. Pamir-Moscow. A Festival of Cultures. Photograph by Yunna Bakal.

city appears much the same vibrant metropolis: polished façades, crowded restaurants, creative spaces, festivals, and exhibitions. But this outward image of stability and prosperity feels increasingly disconnected from our economic or emotional reality. For many of us, the metropolis no longer offers a sense of emotional security. We increasingly experience it as a city on autopilot: beautiful, convenient, but stripped of a sense of future.

And at the same time, as this internal sense of alienation deepens, I find myself thinking more often about others: about my Pamiri friends and their families. Over the past four years, many of them have received Russian citizenship. It is the culmination of years of labour, uncertainty, and attempts at integration. It is a path they have followed for a long time, and now they finally feel like full members of society. When I called one of them during the writing of this essay and said I was working on a piece about migration, she replied, "*But I'm no longer a migrant*". The pride in this achievement of integration was not diminished even by the fact that, since 2022, Russian citizenship has come to carry new burdens, among them the military obligations imposed on the young men, the grown sons of the Pamiri sisters.

While some of us live with a sense of loss for the Moscow we once knew, others are making their dreams come true in the very same city. This doesn't invalidate either experience, but it reveals how differently the city is felt from different vantage points—social, ethnic, emotional.

Moscow remains a compelling place. In spite of the government's increasingly anti-migrant policies and rhetoric, it continues to offer opportunities, especially for those who arrived from the margins, without privileges, but with an immense will to survive. And this, too, is one of the city's paradoxes: what for some has become a space of loss, for others has become a space of gain. The Moscow we inherited and eventually left was a city where these so-called "outsiders" quietly and persistently built new forms of togetherness, making the city their own.



Figure 10. Moscow, 2024. Photograph by Alexander Gronsky.

"It reminded me that sharing knowledge is not only about conveying information but also about affirming one's identity and claiming a space in the shared conversation."

## References

Abashin, Sergey. "Post-Soviet Labour Migration from Central Asian Countries to Russia." *To Live in Two Worlds: Rethinking Transnationalism and Translocation*, edited by Olga Brednikova and Sergey Abashin, 2021.

Abashin, Sergey. "Migration Policies in Russia: Laws and Debates." *Migrant Workers in Russia: Global Challenge*, edited by Anna-Liisa Heusala and Kaarina Aitamurto, Routledge, 2017.

Anthias, Floya, and Gabriella Lazaridis, editors. *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe: Women on the Move*. Routledge, 2020.

Bull, Lindsay. "Lost in a Sea of Subjectivity: The Subject Position of the Researcher in the Anthropology of Islam." *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 173–192, doi.org/10.1007/s11562-007-0015-7.

Burikova, Zuzana S. "Decolonising Demand for Paid Domestic Work and Childcare: Beyond Dyadic Relationships and Western Models." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2023, pp. 410–454, doi.org/10.1177/13505068231159734.

Dave, Bhavna. "Becoming 'Legal' through 'Illegal' Procedures: The Precarious Status of Migrant Workers in Russia." *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 159, 2014, pp. 2–6.

Florinskaya, Yulia F. "Female Labor Migration to Russia: Numbers, Donor Countries, Niches in the Labor Market." *Problemy Prognozirovaniia*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2022, pp. 55–64.

Eraliev, Sherzod, and Anna-Liisa Heusala. "Central Asian Female Migrants' Transnational Social Spaces: Straddling Illegality and Tradition." *Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe: Power, Institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space*, edited by Rano Turaeva and Rustamjon Urinboyev, Routledge, 2021, pp. 114–132.

Gorina, Evgenia, Victor Agadjanian, and Natalia Zotova. "Migrant Women's Economic Success in Russia: Objective Reality and Subjective Assessment." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 44, no. 9, 2018, pp. 1584–1603, doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1354156.

Han, Ju Hui Judy. "Neither Friends nor Foes: Thoughts on Ethnographic Distance." *Geoforum*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 11–14, doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.02.005.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–599, doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

Hemer, Susan R. "The Ethics and Obligations of Long-Term Ethnographic Relationships: Revelatory Moments and the Concept of Solidarity." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 29, 2023, pp. 631–647, doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13963.

Hoffman, Eva T. "Who Goes to Russia? Understanding Gendered Migration Patterns." *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–22, doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2017.1333226.

Gold, Tim. *Anthropology: Why It Matters*. Polity Press, 2018.

Kubal, Agnieszka. *Immigration and Refugee Law in Russia*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, doi.org/10.1017/9781316676678.

Kozlova, Olga A., Elena B. Bedrina, and Natalia P. Neklyudova. "Migrant Women from Central Asian Countries in the Regional Labor Market: Behavioral Patterns." *Women in Russian Society*, no. 3, 2024, pp. 83–100.

Levada Center. "Xenophobia in Russia Grows Second Year Round". *Levada Centre*, 2019, levada.ru/2019/09/18/ksenofobskie-nastroeniya-v-rossii-rastut-vtoroj-god-podryad/.

Macdonald, Cameron Lynne. *Shadow Mothers: Nannies, Au Pairs, and the Micropolitics of Mothering*. University of California Press, 2011.

Mostowlansky, Till. "Diasporas of Empire: Ismaili Networks and Pamiri Migration." *The Central Asian World*, edited by Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Madeleine Reeves, Routledge, 2024, pp. 591–607.

Mukomel, Vladimir. "Xenophobia and Migrant-Phobias in Russia: Origins and Challenges." *Migration Policy Centre*, 2013, migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/Mukomel.pdf.

Norman, Kelsey P., and Carrie Reiling. "The 'Inherent Vulnerability' of Women on the Move: A Gendered Analysis of Morocco's Migration Reform." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2024, pp. 631–644, doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac030.

de Oliveira Assis, Gláucia. "Gender and Migration from Invisibility to Agency: The Routes of Brazilian Women from Transnational Towns to the United States." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 46, 2014, pp. 33–44, doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.01.001.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press, 2021.

Poletaev, Dmitry. "Female Labour Migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia." *Narodonaselenie*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2018, pp. 68–78.

Rahmonova-Schwarz, Delia. *Family and Transnational Mobility in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. Nomos, 2012.

Rocheva, Anna, and Evgeny Varshaver. "Gender Dimension of Migration from Central Asia to the

Russian Federation." *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 87–136.

Round, John, and Irina Kuznetsova. "The Struggle for Formal Work: Everyday Experiences of Russia's Central Asian Labour Migrants." *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe: Power, Institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space*, edited by Rano Turaeva and Rustamjon Urinboyev, Routledge, 2021, pp. 19–35.

Souralová, Adéla. *New Perspectives on Mutual Dependency in Care-Giving.* Ashgate, 2015.

Turaeva, Rano, and Rustamjon Urinboyev, editors. *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe: Power, Institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space.* Routledge, 2021.

Tyuryukanova, Elena, editor. *Female Migrants from the CIS States in Russia.* MAX Press, 2011.

Zotova, Natalia, and Jeffrey H. Cohen. "Class Dynamics in Tajikistan: Development of Urban Middle Class at the Intersection of Migration and Capital." *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2019, e2251, doi.org/10.1002/psp.2251.

Pugh, Allison J., and Sarah Mosseri. "Trust Building vs. 'Just Trust Me': Reflexivity and Resonance in Ethnography." *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 8, 2023, 1069305, doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1069305.

Zhang, Chen, and Y. Zhan. "Taking Distinction Practices Seriously: Methodological Reflections on Ethnographic Distance in Field Work with Marginalized People." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 127, 2025, pp. 308–318, doi.org/10.1111/aman.28067.

Tlostanova, Madina. *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.