Russian Students Abroad: Investigating the influence of Russia’s War in Ukraine on Russian Student Mobility in Italy

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Anno Accademico 2023/2024
Abstract

The study investigates the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on Russian students studying abroad, specifically in Italy. Through a comprehensive exploration of the mobility experience before and after the conflict, the research aims to understand how warfare influences international students' mobility. The research is conducted with the use of both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews) methods. It evaluates the influence of sanctions and restrictions imposed due to the conflict on Russian students in Italy, analyzing their coping strategies and navigation of challenges. Changes in post-war traveling experience are assessed, including shifts in perceptions of safety, attitudes towards mobility, and travel logistics. The role of universities and alterations in future perspectives are explored. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the impact of conflict on international student mobility and provide insights for future research directions.
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I. Introduction

1. How does warfare influence mobilities?

Warfare profoundly affects mobilities by displacing populations, altering border controls, impacting economies, raising safety concerns, and influencing psychological and social dynamics. These factors collectively shape the movement of people and the geopolitical landscape, highlighting the complex interplay between conflict and mobility (Hannonen, Prokkola, 2023). International student mobility, in particular, is vulnerable to the disruptions caused by conflicts. Warfare leads to a complex interplay of factors such as safety concerns, economic instability, and geopolitical tensions, all of which can alter the patterns and experiences of students studying abroad. When a conflict arises, students from the affected regions may face increased difficulties in accessing education abroad due to travel restrictions, visa issues, and economic sanctions. Additionally, the psychological and emotional burden of warfare can impact students’ academic performance and overall well-being. At the same time, studying abroad can help people to move from the place where they suffer from a conflict and give them an opportunity for better life (McVay, 2015; Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2018).

On February 24, 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine in an escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict that had already started in 2014. Named as ‘special military operation’ (SMO) by the Russian Government, the war that followed – and that is still running – resulted in significant geopolitical shifts; these also impacted on Russian students studying abroad, posing challenges that were unexpected until that moment. This work examines how warfare influences the mobilities of international students, with a particular focus on Russian university students in Italy.

It is worth noting that this work will focus not on studying global changes, but on how geopolitical events, as well as the implementation of certain policies, affect the lives of ordinary people. After delineating a broad landscape, resulting from the administration of a survey, we will get acquainted with the stories of ten Russian students, whose period of study in Italy fell during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In their narratives, collected through qualitative interviews, they talk not only about what changed in their lives after the start of the war, but also share personal fears and experiences of living through these events. Thus, this study can also
contribute to the field of geopolitical studies conducted “through the lens of the intimate” (Barabantseva, Ní Mhurchú & Spike Peterson, 2021, p. 343).

2. Overview of the Ukraine conflict and the situation of Russian students abroad

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and escalated into a full-scale war in 2022. This conflict has had widespread implications, both regionally and globally. Sanctions and diplomatic tensions have arisen, leading to economic hardships and a reconfiguration of international relations (Masters, 2020).

There is still debate about the real causes of the conflict and who is to blame for it. But what still remains important is that many people on both sides suffered from the conflict. Many people died and were wounded in places of hostilities, as has been repeatedly reported in the media. According to the information provided by the official website of the European Union (EU), “Since Russia's invasion, the EU provided economic, humanitarian and military support for Ukraine worth over €88 billion” (Official website of EU, n.d.). However, the impact of the conflict extends far beyond the combat zone, affecting a wider spectrum of individuals. For instance a large sum of people decided to relocate. While this is evident for Ukrainians, feeding one of the larger European internally refugee flow of the last decades, also other subjects fed mobilities flows that possibly already existed, but that became larger or imbued with renewed meaning. The most known case is the escape of dissidents of the Russian political regime; another one – which this study considers – is the case of university students. By focusing on this target, this study does not seek to diminish the significant harm and losses endured by the Ukrainian people but aims to highlight another group that has been affected by the Russia-Ukraine conflict: Russian citizens.

The repercussions of the war have rippled through Russian society, touching lives in profound and often overlooked ways. Economic sanctions imposed on Russia have led to financial instability, job losses, and restricted access to international markets, severely impacting ordinary Russians. The international isolation and economic downturn have strained the livelihoods of many, including students pursuing education abroad. After the beginning of the conflict many Russian students abroad started to face various challenges. Jack (2022) describes challenges Russian students in Europe face due to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, including the
experience of rising Russophobia and pressure from Moscow to return home. Some students report discrimination, with universities in the UK and Estonia rejecting applicants or supporting Russophobia. However, some institutions like Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland) and Charles University (Czech Republic) offer support to Russian students. The Kremlin exploits these discrimination claims to encourage students to return, viewing the diaspora as a potential threat. As a result, Jack argues that discrimination is counterproductive and could reinforce Kremlin propaganda.

Bhargava (2024) provides information about Russian students in Canada who are struggling due to financial sanctions impacting their country's economy and their ability to receive funds from home. The article is concerned with the stories of two Russian students who face challenges in paying tuition and managing daily expenses as their families' financial support is cut off. The sanctions have isolated Russian banks, making money transfers difficult. Both students condemn the war and express distress over the limited information from Russia and the dangers faced by friends and family in Ukraine. They also fear discrimination and losing friendships due to their nationality. Canadian universities are providing financial and emotional support to affected students (Bhargava, 2024).

Russian students in Italy, like those in other countries, have had to navigate a new landscape of restrictions, sanctions, and altered perceptions. The conflict has disrupted their academic journeys, necessitating adjustments in their mobility, security, and financial stability. Understanding these changes is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of warfare on international education.

3. Research question and objectives

This study aims to investigate the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on Russian university students studying in Italy and answer the question, “How has the Russo-Ukrainian conflict changed the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy?” The study employs both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) methods to gather data and insights.

The primary objective of this research is to elucidate the specific impacts that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has had on Russian university students studying in Italy. This includes
examining changes in their academic experiences, personal lives, and future aspirations. The study will consider how sanctions and travel restrictions have affected their studies and the ways in which they have adapted to these challenges. We will address the shifts in perceptions of safety, attitudes towards international mobility, and the logistical aspects of traveling. By understanding these changes, the study aims to provide a nuanced perspective on how conflict-induced disruptions influence the educational trajectories of international students. The knowledge gathered will provide a more sounded picture of a kind of mobility that has not been studied in detail yet, locating the role of universities as a key “mooring” (Söderström, 2013) site among multifarious mobilities trajectories.

The next chapter will give us an overview of existing research related to the historical background and development of international education. It will highlight trends and attitudes towards international education in the Russian Federation from the 2000s to 2021. The chapter also explores the concept of international students as educational tourists and examines how geopolitical conflicts impact traveling. Additionally, it analyzes the motivations behind students’ decisions to study abroad through the push and pull factors framework, considers the concept of mooring, and discusses the specific impact of sanctions on international students.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology employed in this study. It will detail the research design and data collection methods. This chapter also discusses the researcher's positionality and the ethical considerations involved in conducting this research.

Chapter four presents the findings of the research. It starts by exploring the motivations of Russian students to pursue education abroad. Then, it examines the impact of the Ukraine conflict on Russian students studying abroad, with a particular focus on the effects of sanctions and restrictions on Russian students in Italy. This includes an assessment of how these affect students, and a discussion on coping strategies. The chapter further investigates changes in traveling experiences, such as perceptions of safety, attitudes towards mobility, and travel logistics. Finally, it assesses how the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy has changed since the beginning of the war, emphasizing the role of universities and the shift in students’ future perspectives.
Chapter five synthesizes the findings, discussing their broader implications and contextualizing them within the existing body of literature. It will also suggest directions for future research, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of how geopolitical conflicts influence the mobility and experiences of international students and the crucial role played by universities with this regard.

In conclusion, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict serves as an example of how warfare can reshape international student mobilities. By focusing on Russian students in Italy, this study seeks to shed light on the multifaceted impacts of the conflict and contribute to the broader understanding of how such crises affect international students. The findings from this research will offer valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and future studies on the intersection of conflict, higher education, and mobility.
II. Literature review

1. Trends and attitudes towards international education in the Russian Federation in the 2000s – 2021

International education refers to the global exchange of knowledge, skills, and cultural perspectives among students, educators, and institutions across borders. It encompasses a wide range of educational activities, including study abroad programs, international collaborations, and the pursuit of academic qualifications in foreign countries.

In an increasingly interconnected world, international education plays a crucial role in preparing individuals to navigate and contribute to the complexities of our globalized society. It goes beyond traditional classroom learning, offering students opportunities to engage with diverse cultures, languages, and academic systems. This exposure fosters a deeper understanding of global issues, promotes cross-cultural communication, and enhances the development of a global mindset.

The evolution of international education has been a dynamic journey spanning for centuries, shaped by cultural, economic, and political forces. From its roots in itinerant teachers in Ancient Greece to the establishment of universities in medieval Europe, and the subsequent "Grand Tour" of the 16th-19th centuries, education has continuously transcended borders. The 20th century saw a shift towards nationalization and then a revival in global education efforts after World War II, driven by the need for development and modernization (Gultekin, 2021).

The 1970s marked a turning point with a rise in student mobility in Europe, stimulated by both national and macroregional initiatives. As internationalization became increasingly intertwined with economies, the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the subsequent Bologna Declaration in 1999 sought to harmonize European higher education, emphasizing easily comparable degrees, two-cycle structures, credit systems, and enhanced mobility (Huisman et al., 2012). The Sorbonne Declaration was signed in 1998 by the ministers of four countries, namely France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy. The purpose of the declaration was to create common provisions for the standardization of the European Higher Education Area, where mobility should be encouraged for both students and graduates, as well as for staff development. In addition, the declaration had to ensure that the qualifications meet modern requirements in the
labor market. The Bologna Declaration is a declaration on international cooperation in the field of higher education, signed in Bologna by the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries. The signed document set the following goals for the States, the implementation of which was planned during the first decade of the new millennium:

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.
3. Establishment of a system of credits.
4. Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement for students, teachers, researchers, and administrative stuff.
5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.
6. Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

Both the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the Bologna Declaration in 1999 were crafted during a period of optimism and cooperation in Europe. Politically, this era saw the aftermath of the Cold War, fostering a spirit of unity and collaboration among European nations. Culturally, there was a growing recognition of the importance of internationalization and academic exchange in an increasingly interconnected world. These declarations emerged within a context of evolving European identity and a desire to strengthen the continent's competitiveness in the global arena (De Wit, H., 2015).

As we entered the new millennium, education transformed into a tradable commodity, with internationalization gaining great importance. However, the 2010s brought new challenges, with increased competition and financialization, turning educational institutions into influential businesses. Rankings became central in this competitive landscape, shaping the global movement of students (Gultekin, 2021).

In this interconnected world, the importance of international education extends beyond individual development. It contributes to economic growth, fosters diplomatic ties, and addresses shared global challenges. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the role of international education remains pivotal in preparing individuals to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.
During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was in a period of transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only economic, political and ideological reforms were carried out in the country, but also educational reforms. The Communist Party's control over cultural and educational matters was eliminated, leading to the gradual lifting of ideological restrictions. This resulted in a transformation where educational institutions became open forums for discussion. School and university curricula were no longer constrained by ideological preferences, granting teachers and students greater freedom in their teaching and learning approaches (Nikandrov, 2014).

There was a growing recognition of the importance of internationalization in various sectors, including education. As defined by Knight, internationalization is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural and/or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight 2003a, p. 2).

A significant step in the process of reformation and internationalization was the Russian government's decision to sign the Bologna Declaration. The debate surrounding this decision encompassed philosophical, developmental, and governance concerns, as well as technical aspects of educational standardization. Conservative ideologies expressed worries about preserving Russian spirituality and cultural identity against Western materialism. Joining the Bologna Process was primarily a political move for Russia, aiming to transition from historical reliance on geopolitical 'hard power' to compete in the global arena for 'soft power' or human potential. The decision was also driven by political interests in fostering cultural dialogue with Europe, its key regional partner, amid less accessible economic and political interrelations (Telegina & Schwengel, 2012).

After Russia joined the Bologna Process, there has been a renewed emphasis on student mobility in the management of Russian universities. Recognizing student mobility as crucial for maintaining competitiveness, universities started actively promoting on both the domestic and international educational services markets.

The Russian government took steps to establish partnerships with foreign universities and facilitate student mobility. Efforts were made to balance the benefits of international education with strategies to retain skilled professionals in Russia. There was a growing understanding that
exposure to international academic environments could enhance the quality of education and research in Russia. Students who studied abroad were expected to bring back valuable knowledge and experiences to contribute to the development of Russian academia.

Various international programs actively encourage student mobility, with many countries engaging in bilateral and multilateral agreements in this domain. Notable European initiatives include well-known programs such as "Erasmus", "Socrates1", "Nordplus2", and others. (Emelyanova et al, 2020)

On December 28, 2013, the President of the Russian Federation signed Decree No. 967, outlining measures to enhance the human resources potential of the country. This decree specifically established principles for implementing the Program of Social Support for Russian citizens who independently enrolled in top foreign educational institutions, ensuring that the quality of education aligned with international standards. The program aimed to facilitate the employment of these individuals in Russian organizations corresponding to their qualifications. The subsequent approval of the program occurred through Government Decree No. 568 on June 20, 2014. (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. (n.d.). О Программе: Общие положения и материалы. Государственная программа Глобальное Образование.)

Figure 1 illustrates a consistent rise in the number of Russian students studying abroad since 2003, the year Russia signed the Bologna Declaration. This leads us to the conclusion that the Russian government supported and encouraged international academic mobility. The support for such mobility aligns with the nation's emphasis on developing and sustaining international relations, facilitating knowledge circulation, and promoting economic growth. The upward trend also reflects the students' own eagerness to engage in international academic experiences.

As we can see, the late 1990s and early 2000s marked a transformative period in Russia, characterized by economic, political, and ideological reforms, including changes in the

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1 Socrates is an educational program with a broad range of activities that was adopted on 14 March 1995 and lasted until 1999.
2 Nordplus Higher Education Programme is a mobility and network programme in the higher education sector, on bachelor and master levels, for the Nordic and Baltic countries. The aim of the programme is to create a collaboration between the institutions that participate in the programme through exchanges, experience, good practice and innovative results. (Erasmus Generation Portal)
The signing of the Bologna Declaration became a pivotal step, reflecting Russia's endeavor to integrate into global educational frameworks.

The decision to join the Bologna Process was multifaceted, driven by political, philosophical, and developmental considerations. Embracing internationalization, particularly through student mobility, became a focal point for Russian universities and the government. Efforts were directed towards fostering partnerships with foreign institutions, promoting educational services domestically and internationally, and actively encouraging student mobility.

Figure 1. Number of Russian students studying abroad 2003-2021. Personal elaboration. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2023.

Figure 1 demonstrates the gradual increase in the number of Russian university students going abroad since 2003 (the year Russia joined the Bologna Process) with the notable decrees in 2019 due to the COVID - 19 pandemic. (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NATMON_DS, 9.12.2023) In order to show more clearly how the percentage of students studying abroad has grown, let's look at the total number of students in Russia in different years. At the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year, about 4.22 million students studied in Russian universities, in 2015 the number of university students was 4.77 million, in 2004/2005 - 6.88 million students. As we can see, the number of students in Russia has decreased over time, while the number of Russian students
studying abroad has only increased. (Rosstat. Federal State Statistics Service, https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/, 16.05.2024)

2. International students as educational tourists

There is a growing recognition that international students can be considered a form of "educational tourists." Many students choose to study abroad not only for academic purposes but also to immerse themselves in a new culture, gain diverse experiences, and explore the host country. This perspective aligns with the idea of "edu-tourism" or "edu-travel" (Hobbs, 2019; Abdulateef & Biodun, 2014).

First of all, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term “educational tourism”. For that we address the study of Bello et al. (2014) who examined different approaches to edu-tourism and, taking into consideration relevant elements and analyzing various components of the concept to come to the following definition: “edu-tourism involves discretionary travel and temporary stay of a person(s) away from their usual place of residence for a minimum of 1 night and a maximum of 5 years for the purpose of education (depending on the country or region) provided the primary purpose of the trip is unconnected to earning remuneration” (Bello et al., 2014). This definition embraces a huge share of travelers. Here we can include, for example, students who come to a conference in another region, people traveling to some specific destinations with the aim of exploring, and also students going to study abroad.

Why do we consider the topic of traveling to be relevant in discussion devoted to international students? As many studies show, it is relevant for both students and host countries. Traveling is one of the main motivations for students to receive education abroad. For the host countries it is a way to get more financial gain, as international students constitute their own market. Knowing how to address the needs of this market correctly, the host countries can make a huge income (Shanka, Ali-Knight & Pope, 2002).

In a broader way, staying in another country for educational purposes may itself be considered as a traveling experience, which greatly benefits the economy of a host country. First of all, international students bring to their host country direct financial benefits – tuition fees (Stein & De Andreotti, 2016). For example, According to Levent (2016) international students in
2013 – 2014 contributed about 19.8 billion dollars to the American economy (considering only tuition fees). These fees are a source of revenue for educational institutions and can help fund academic programs, research initiatives, and infrastructure development.

One more essential aspect of the economic impact of international students on their host countries is subsistence spending (all spending other than tuition fees) (Johnston, Baker, & Creedy, 2010). A huge part of the students' funds goes to cover living expenses. Hosting international students stimulates the local economy, as they spend money on:

1) Accommodation: International students typically rent housing, whether it's on-campus dormitories or off-campus apartments. This contributes to the local real estate market and supports landlords, property management services, and related industries.

2) Food: International students purchase groceries, eat at local restaurants, and contribute to the overall food industry. This spending supports local farmers, markets, supermarkets, and restaurants.

3) Transportation: International students use local transportation services, such as buses, trains, taxis, and ride-sharing services. This spending benefits the transportation industry and helps maintain and improve local infrastructure.

4) Other Living Expenses: International students spend on various goods and services, including clothing, healthcare, entertainment, and more. This diverse spending pattern has a broad impact on local businesses and service providers.

In a narrower sense, we mean by educational tourism the various trips undertaken by international students within or outside the host country during their studies. Concerning a study based in Australia, Michael et al. (2004) considered that 64.4 % of international students who responded to their study (141 out of 219) travelled within the host country (Australia) during their studies.

However, we can talk about traveling while studying abroad, not only as part of recreation and cultural acquaintance for students and obtaining financial benefits for the host country, but we can also trace the connection between travel and its role in the education of
students. For example, the travel experience can be very useful for students whose educational program is related to tourism. From this point of view the research conducted by Hobbs (2019) is very illustrative. The author studies “the symmetry between the tourism and education of international tourism students’ experience” (p. 203) and comes to the conclusion that students indeed were more aware of their travel behavior, made choices based on the theory they learnt in classes and generally applied their knowledge during travelling (Hobbs, 2019).

The concept of educational tourism, or "edu-tourism," encompasses the multifaceted experiences of international students studying abroad. The significance of this phenomenon extends beyond individual enrichment, with substantial economic implications for both students and host countries. International students contribute significantly to the economies of their host nations through tuition fees, subsistence spending, and indirect contributions to various sectors such as real estate, food, transportation, and entertainment. Moreover, the educational journey of international students is intertwined with travel experiences that can enhance their academic learning.

3. Borders, barriers, and the impact of geopolitical conflicts on traveling (specifically international education)

In our interconnected world, the existence of borders and barriers has become an inherent aspect of international relations. Every sovereign state defines and protects its territorial integrity through borders, creating a complex web of geopolitical dynamics. The ease with which individuals can cross these borders is subject to the varying requirements set by each state. These border policies are influenced by factors such as national security, economic considerations, and geopolitical conflicts.

Despite the pervasive discourse on globalization and the increased interconnection of states across various aspects of human life, the current reality contrasts with the ease and speed of movement that characterizes our contemporary world. Paradoxically, despite advancements in technology and communication facilitating global connectivity, crossing borders has become more difficult because of the stringent system of rules and requirements. Navigating the complexities of border control now demands a level of compliance and scrutiny more carefully
than ever before, underscoring the tension between the borderless ideals often associated with globalization and the practicalities of stringent national regulations.

Before the advent of the modern nation-state in the early 19th century, the freedom to travel between sovereign territories was largely unrestricted. The need for passports for international travel emerged as sovereign states sought to control and regulate movement. Stricter controls, including passport and visa requirements, were introduced during the First World War, often justified by concerns about national security and public order (Bianchi, 2020).

Borders, acting as specific barriers, imply compliance with various requirements for crossing, such as the availability of documents, restrictions on the duration of stay, restrictions on the types and volumes of goods transported, as well as strict rules in the field of customs and taxation. At the same time, invisible or mental barriers arise from various geopolitical, economic and socio-cultural factors, shaping travel behavior. It is important to consider the relationship between physical and mental barriers, as they mutually affect each other. Physical obstacles can affect mental ones, and conversely, mental barriers can affect the perception and application of physical control measures at borders (Hannonen & Prokkola 2023).

Two famous examples of borders which may be seen both as concrete barriers and mental barriers are the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall. Both were supposed to ‘protect’, to ‘prevent something (somebody) from entering the certain zone’. But, as stated by Langerbein in his research, they both are “commonly believed to have been ineffective in accomplishing their respective objective” (Langerbein, p. 23, 2009). In the same research the author talks about one more barrier – the U.S. border fence between Mexico and the U.S. – making parallels and coming to the conclusion that this barrier will unlikely become a famous tourist attraction or a symbol of power like the Great Wall of China but will “keep people seeking freedom and opportunity locked in poverty and desperation” as it was in the case of the Berlin Wall (Langerbein, p. 24, 2009).

The disparities in border policies create a world where citizens of different countries face varying levels of difficulty when crossing international boundaries. Passport strength, economic stability, and diplomatic relationships all contribute to the ease or difficulty with which individuals can travel. Citizens of economically prosperous and politically stable nations often
enjoy visa-free access to a multitude of countries, while those from conflict-ridden or economically struggling regions face numerous barriers. Moreover, one and the same border may be easily crossed by citizens from one side, while being extremely hard to cross for those from the other side, as in the case with the US-Mexico border (Hannonen & Prokkola 2023).

Conflicts, strained geopolitical ties among nations, and disagreements over borders frequently reinforce physical borders, along with collective and individual psychological barriers. (Hannonen & Prokkola 2023). When tensions escalate, states often respond by tightening their border controls in an effort to enhance national security. Stringent visa requirements, increased security checks, and the deployment of additional border patrol forces are common measures taken to safeguard against potential threats emanating from conflicted regions.

All citizens of a country involved in a geopolitical conflict inevitably face restrictions when crossing the border to one degree or another. This may be dictated both by the policy of their own State and by the response of other States to the events taking place. Borders, being manifestations of the political dynamics between nations, influence the movement and travel patterns in more intricate ways than just on a bilateral level (Hannonen & Prokkola 2023).

As Mau (2010) points, borders are usually not completely closed or open. The openness and closeness work selectively for different people. Even citizens of the same country may have unequal rights to mobility depending on different factors, such as income, social status, gender, age, etc.

Borders are also not fixed. They change, evolve, and depend on the actions of people. Here we can address the notion of “borderscape”. The term “borderscape”, which emerged at the turn of the century, has gained popularity and was presumably first coined by performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes in 1999. The term blends “border” and “landscape”, reflecting both the spatial aspect of borders and the practices that shape them. “Borderscape” can be understood in multiple ways, but in general, it represents the idea that borders are not static lines but dynamic, evolving features influenced by social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors, and it underscores the significant role of human perception in shaping and experiencing these spaces (Dell'agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015). The term
"borderscape" offers a promising framework for analyzing boundaries, emphasizing that borders are embedded within specific landscapes where practices maintaining them occur (Siegel, 2022).

The area of our interest is international students’ mobility, specifically university students. According to Erden (2016), students’ academic mobility is defined as “the ability to move freely or be easily moved” (Erden, p. 81, 2016). In terms of the widely used distinction between voluntary and forced migration, student migration is usually considered to be voluntary (Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2018). The existing studies show, though, that the position of student migrants is more ambiguous and their ability to move may be influenced by different factors.

The distinction between forced and voluntary migration is especially relevant for policy makers. Those who argue for more liberal policies towards migrants consider forced migration any migration “taking place in a context of global injustice”, while their opponents who tend to minimize responsibilities towards migrants typically seek a concept that restricts forced migration to a relatively narrow scope, reserved for those experiencing severe deprivation in their home country (Ottonelli & Torresi, p. 809, 2013). Considering the broader understanding of forced migration, international students can also fall under the category of forced migrants under specific circumstances, i.e. as they seek to escape injustice in their home country. It may be financial difficulties (McVay, 2015), different kinds of traumatic experiences in home country (Holness, 2018), armed conflicts (Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2018).

Kirkegaard and Nat-George (2018) show how the globalization of higher education provided a new avenue of escape for students seeking to leave violent armed conflicts or wars. Many of these students, including those examined in the study, would not have qualified as regular forced migrants or asylum seekers. This is either because they leave conflicts during non-active periods or because the type of violence they have encountered does not meet the criteria for asylum. For the majority of these students, departing from their home country as students is the only way to escape (Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2018).

However, this and similar studies most often consider situations in which armed conflicts are already taking place directly on the territory of the country that people are trying to leave. There is a lack of research on cases where military operations are not conducted on the territory
of a country, but there is a possibility of such an outcome or the likelihood of being involved in a conflict on the territory of another state.

In conclusion, we see that borders and barriers play a huge role in our world, forming complex relations between countries and affecting the movement of people. Strict border control reflects the desire of States to protect their territory and address security issues. Boundaries can be both physical and psychological, and they affect not only the ability to move, but also our perception and behavior. Differences in border crossing rules reflect differences in passport strength, economic status, and relations between countries. In the realm of student mobility, the distinction between forced and voluntary migration becomes blurred, especially concerning international students. While traditionally viewed as voluntary migrants, many students may be escaping injustice, armed conflicts or economic hardship in their home countries. The globalization of higher education has provided an avenue for these students to seek refuge, albeit with its own set of challenges and limitations. Further research is needed to understand how borders affect people, especially in settings where conflict does not occur directly. This will help us create more equitable and humane migration and education policies. In general, it is important to recognize the difficulties that people face when crossing borders and strive to create more just and humane rules and policies.

4. Students’ motivation to study abroad. Push and pull factors

Why do many people choose to study abroad? It is possible to answer this question using different approaches. One of the popular approaches is the theory of push and pull factors. This model, rooted in migration studies, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics behind students’ decisions to study abroad.

“Push” factors exist in the home country and drive students’ decision to leave their country of origin. “Pull” factors are those which make other countries attractive to come and study there (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push and pull model was used in the research of Lee (1966) as a way to explain which factors impact people migration flows (Lee, 2014). Later, this model was used by McMahon (1992) in relation to students who go to study abroad. In the research, the authors examine the movement of students from a range of low and middle-income countries to the richer ones. Among the push factors, the following are considered: the conditions
of home country economic weakness, a country’s involvement in the global economy, a country’s concernment with education, and a certain level of educational opportunity (McMahon, 1992, p. 476). Such criteria as the existence of linkages between two countries and the economic capacity of a country compared to that of the host country (U.S. in this case). According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), the process by which an international student chooses a final study destination seems to encompass three stages. Initially, the student must decide to study abroad, a choice influenced by various “push” factors within their home country. Following the decision to study abroad, the subsequent step involves selecting a host country. At this stage the “pull” factors become important. The last stage involves the selection of an institution, which is also influenced by different “pull” factors making one institution more attractive than others.

This approach is more connected to the study of global economic factors. On the other hand, we can turn to a different approach, which considers more specific, personalized cases, namely the motivational approach. Chirkov et al. (2007) distinguish autonomous and coerced motivations. Two types of autonomous motivation are identified, namely intrinsic motivation and internalized extrinsic motivation – identified regulation. In instances of intrinsic motivation, individuals participate in an activity because the activity itself brings satisfaction and enjoyment. This type of motivation is autonomous, as individuals willingly engage in the activity solely for its own sake, driven by personal interest rather than the anticipation of rewards. If they are autonomously motivated because the activity is important for their values, it may be called an identified regulation, which is a type of extrinsic motivation. In case of extrinsic motivation, individuals aim to achieve external goals through an activity. If a person performs an activity to avoid some kind of punishment or to get a reward, it is the case of external regulation. Introjected regulation implies doing something in order to get approval or to avoid the feeling of guilt. In such cases there is no direct pressure but people still believe they are expected to do things in a certain way (Chirkov et al., 2007).

Speaking about personal choices it is important to note that for every single student their motives are unique. At the same time, it is possible to identify some similar motivations noted by a large number of people, which allows us to have an idea of the most common reasons for choosing a foreign education.
One of the most common answers given to the question “Why do you want to study abroad?” is connected with getting acquainted with another culture. One way or another, this answer is mentioned by almost all respondents participating in studies on education abroad conducted by Harrell (2017), Casas Trujillo et al (2020), Anderson (2015), Sánchez (2006).

With the advent of the digital era, the spread of the Internet, and globalization, people have gained access to a huge amount of information of various contents. Among this information, including text information about other countries and cultures, there are a lot of photo and video materials. However, many people do not just want to learn more about other countries by ‘gazing’, they want to be physically present, to immerse themselves in another culture, experience all the pros and cons of living in another place, and get acquainted with the mentality of other people.

A lot of respondents express their desire to travel as one of the leading motives they have. Some of them even highlight that the travelling experience of students is not the same as the experience of tourists. In a study conducted by Harrell (2017), a respondent explicitly declared that “she was able to learn things that she would never know if she went to Madrid as a tourist” (p. 61).

Of course, students who decide to study abroad strive to achieve certain educational goals. For some of them this goal is to apply their knowledge received at home “to real-world situations”. (Harrell, 2017, p. 61). Some respondents believe they can benefit from a better educational system and a more prestigious diploma (Anderson, 2015). Moreover, students consider getting education abroad as a way of acquiring knowledge which can be later transmitted to their home community and used to educate other people or conduct significant research in their home country (Nachatar Singh & Hazri 2021).

This leads to another important theme which can be traced through the answers of students – the career development. “Most of the students agreed that as a result of studying abroad, job opportunities could be enhanced” (Casas Trujillo et al, 2020, p. 35). Often, obtaining a foreign education and a diploma is perceived by students as gaining access to a more prestigious, high-paying job. This might be especially significant for students coming from so-called developing countries to developed ones (who represent the majority of international
students according to Perkins, 2014: the predominant pattern, at least for the largest [student] flows, is from low and middle-income countries to the richer ones).

An integral part of getting an education abroad is language practice, which is also a motivation for students to enroll in foreign educational institutions (Harrell, 2017; Casas Trujillo et al, 2020; Anderson, 2015; Sánchez, 2006). In another country, students not only improve their language skills while attending classes, but also by communicating with other students and in everyday communication. A good command of a foreign language not only increases a person's status in the employment market, but also helps to broaden their horizons, develop intercultural and interpersonal communication skills, and be more open to new experiences.

Another popular topic turned out to be personal growth. For example, for some respondents studying abroad meant to “learn more about themselves while attempting to adapt to their new country” (Casas Trujillo et al, 2020). Some students expected to gain independence and maturity, increase their self-confidence, and obtain “liberty” (Casas Trujillo et al, 2020; Anderson, 2015; Sánchez, 2006).

Despite the fact that studying abroad is usually considered more expensive, in some cases it turns out to be cheaper to get an education abroad than in your home country. Students can benefit from scholarships or lower tuition fees (Bridgestock, 2021). For example, the cost of higher education in the United States is considered quite high, and free colleges are available only in 20 states, and most often only for residents of these states (Coursera Staff, 2023). At the same time, there is an opportunity to study for free in Germany, including for international students from all over the world. Thus, it may be cheaper for an U.S. citizen to study in Germany than in his home country (Study.eu Team, 2023).

Speaking about Russian students’ motivation we can address the research conducted by Bokareva (2014) who found out that the most relevant motivations for Russian students to study abroad are to get cultural experience, to emigrate or to get a diploma of foreign University. There are not many studies concerning the motivations of Russian students pursuing education abroad. Given that fact, this research will provide some insights into the factors driving Russian students to seek educational opportunities beyond their homeland.
In conclusion, the decision to study abroad is a multifaceted process influenced by a combination of push and pull factors. The push factors, originating from the home country, drive students to seek educational opportunities abroad due to economic, educational, and global factors. Conversely, the pull factors inherent in host countries attract students with promises of quality education, diverse cultural experiences, and enhanced career prospects. Additionally, the motivational approach highlights the individualized nature of students' decisions, with motivations ranging from intrinsic desires for cultural immersion to extrinsic goals like career advancement. Understanding these factors provides insight into the complexities of international student mobility and underscores the importance of considering both macroeconomic trends and personal motivations in analyzing study abroad decisions.

5. The university as a place of mooring

Adopting a mobilities perspective doesn’t mean focusing only on movement and circulation. On the contrary, mobilities scholars have also paid attention to what may enact or stop mobility, or also to those ‘hubs’ where a moving entity can stop before continuing. Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) defined these sites for temporary stasis as “moorings”. For Söderström (2013, p. 7), “Mobility (...) is a relational phenomenon and should be understood as depending on a series of moorings, including infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and the social practices that enable or further it, or even contest and curb it.”

The university – as a physical site as well as a networked infrastructure – can serve as a place of mooring, providing international students with a sense of stability, connection, and belonging. It is a harbor where diverse ideas converge, fostering dialogue, debate, and collaboration. Beyond academic pursuits, the university also offers opportunities for social interaction, cultural exploration, and personal exploration, enriching the lives of its members and nurturing a sense of identity and purpose. In a world full of uncertainty and constant changes the university stands as a constant, supporting students on their journey of discovery and providing them with a firm foundation upon which to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Moreover, it is a place where people can come in search of help and protection, and find a ‘shelter’.
As it was discussed before, education can nowadays provide people a way for escaping military conflicts and the university may serve as a place of mooring in this case, giving people different opportunities, thus helping them to stay away from the potential threat. The theme of the university being the space of mooring for students fleeing from war, which is highly relevant for this research, is discussed in the study of Kirkegaard and Nat-George (2018). Using the notion ‘mooring’, meaning the fixity that enables the “fluidities of liquid modernity” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 210), Kirkegaard and Nat-George argue that educational institutions do not only act as places of temporary staying but also the space “for individuals to (re)order, negotiate and make sense of haunting life experiences as well as to envisage possible futures” (Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2018, p. 440).

Indeed, universities often provide different opportunities for students which are found in difficult life situations. For example, many educational institutions offer various kinds of scholarships, help with accommodation, psychological assistance, etc. One crucial aspect for all international students is the legal permission provided by the university for their stay in a foreign country. This authorization not only ensures compliance with immigration laws but also offers a sense of security and stability during their time abroad. It allows students to focus on their studies and fully engage in university life without the added stress of uncertain residency status. Moreover, this legal documentation facilitates access to essential services, such as healthcare and employment opportunities, contributing to a more enriching and fulfilling academic experience. Thanks to this, students have a certain amount of time (depending on their level of study) to acquire necessary knowledge for the future career and to envision their plans for the future.

In our research we will further talk about the university being a vital mooring point, providing stability, support, and opportunities for individuals to navigate the complexities of life and pursue their aspirations.

6. The impact of sanctions on international students

When countries are in conflict, one of the levers of influence is often the imposition of sanctions. Sanctions are typically utilized by sender countries to put economic and diplomatic pressure on target countries with the aim to force political leadership to comply with certain demands. Sanctions can serve various objectives, such as preventing conflicts, combating
terrorism, promoting democracy, or ending government repression. However, alongside their intended goals, economic sanctions often result in significant socio-economic and political harm within target countries. In essence, while sanctions may aim to achieve specific policy objectives, their unintended consequences can lead to destabilization in the targeted nations (Peksen, 2009).

Though the goal of sanctions is to use some pressure on the political elite to bring about positive change in a regime, citizens frequently bear the burden of sanctions more than those in positions of authority. Dursun Peksen’s article “Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights” (2009) is concerned with the problem of harmful influence that sanctions have on civilians and their integral rights. Peksen demonstrates that economic sanctions have unintended negative consequences on human rights conditions in target countries. The research findings suggest that extensive sanctions, especially those imposed multilaterally, can lead to greater violations of integrity rights. Additionally, human rights sanctions are shown to be counterproductive, increasing the probability of human rights abuses. The study underscores the importance of considering the delicate balance between using economic coercion to induce policy change and the potential exacerbation of human rights violations. It suggests that economic coercion, as a frequently used tool of international pressure, often results in an increase in repression rather than improvement in human rights. The study calls for further research to explore the interaction between economic sanctions and other external tools, such as foreign aid and economic loans, in their impact on human rights (Peksen, 2009).

However, apart from the fact that sanctions create obvious economic problems for people, and can also lead to the fact that human rights are under greater threat, another sector suffering from sanctions is science.

Modern academic research and education are deeply intertwined with international networks, collaboration, and access to resources. The imposition of sanctions raises significant concerns for academia, extending beyond limitations on importing equipment or finances. Modern sanctions also restrict online activity, impacting access to data and publications. For instance, some academic publishers may not accept submissions from authors in sanctioned countries. As a result, sanctions influence research agendas, dissemination of knowledge, and
educational practices. Particularly for countries with small academic communities and low STEM investment, the effects of sanctions can be devastating. However, there is a lack of evidence on the full impact of sanctions on academic activities in these communities (Bezuidenhout et al., 2019).

Even less studies exist about a silent cohort profoundly affected by sanctions: international students studying abroad. These students, far from their homeland, find themselves caught in the crossfire of international sanctions, facing unforeseen challenges that jeopardize their educational pursuits and future prospects. Take, for instance, the case of Iranian students studying in the United States or Russian students in Europe. In her dissertation “The sanctioned students”, Cecelia Johansson (2013) conducts an empirical study on how the sanctions influenced Iranian students’ experience of studying abroad. The research aims to explore the specific effects of sanctions on Iranian students studying abroad, shedding light on their experiences and perceptions. By adopting a qualitative approach, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and human rights implications of economic sanctions on Iran. The majority of Iranian students studying abroad are affected by economic sanctions, primarily through restricted access to financial resources and increased financial insecurity. While not all students are impacted equally, the study highlights the multifaceted effects of sanctions on individuals geographically distant from the targeted state. It emphasizes the need for policymakers to consider the unintended consequences of sanctions on innocent populations and their long-term implications for societal dynamics and stability (Johansson, 2013).

One more study about Iranian students abroad was conducted by Bezuidenhout, Karrar, Lezaun, and Nobes (2019). They investigate the psychosocial adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary over a period of 7–12 months, focusing on challenges related to visas, banking, and currency crisis. The aim is to understand how students’ mental health and adaptations change over time in response to these challenges. The study highlights the complex interplay between sociopolitical, economic, and personal factors influencing the psychosocial adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary. While challenges such as visa restrictions, banking issues, and currency devaluation adversely affect mental health, positive experiences of independence and freedom contribute to improved well-being. The findings underscore the resilience of Iranian students in
coping with adversity while emphasizing the need for supportive policies and interventions to address their unique needs in a foreign country (Bezuidenhout et al, 2019).

Looking at these studies, we can see that one of the immediate impacts of sanctions on international students is financial strain. Sanctions can disrupt financial systems, making it difficult for students to access funds from their home countries or receive scholarships and grants. Additionally, currency devaluation and economic instability can significantly inflate living expenses, making it challenging for students to afford basic necessities such as housing, food, and healthcare. As a result, many students are forced to take on additional jobs or reduce their academic load to make ends meet, thereby compromising their academic performance and overall well-being. Moreover, sanctions can impede academic collaboration and exchange programs, depriving students of invaluable opportunities for research, networking, and professional development. Social and psychological issues should also be taken into consideration.

In conclusion, the impact of sanctions on international students studying abroad is profound and multifaceted. From financial hardship to social isolation, these students face a myriad of challenges that threaten their educational aspirations and overall well-being.

In this chapter, we focused on the existing scientific literature that provides substantial insights into the trends and attitudes towards international education in Russia over the last decades, including the motivations that drive students to go abroad and the impact of geopolitical conflicts on their mobility and travel. The literature concerning the impact of sanctions on international students was also addressed. However, there is a notable lack of research focusing on students from countries under heavy sanctions, such as Russian students enrolled in Italian universities. While studies on Iranian students have been more prevalent, the unique challenges faced by Russian students, especially in the context of the recent geopolitical tensions between Russia and Ukraine, remain underexplored. Another gap in the literature is the lack of research devoted to the motivations of Russian students to study abroad.

Our study aims to fill these gaps by examining the experiences of Russian university students in Italy, focusing on their motivations, the challenges they face, and the support systems they rely
on. By doing so, we hope to contribute valuable insights that can inform policies and practices to better support international students from sanctioned countries.

The following chapters will detail our research methodology, present the findings of our study, and discuss their implications in light of the existing literature. Through this research, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between international sanctions, geopolitical conflicts, and student mobility, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on international education and migration.
III. Methodology

1. Research design

In this research a mixed method approach is used. First, a questionnaire was created and used to get some statistical data. Second, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect first-hand information about the effects which sanctions had on students’ mobility experience.

Using the quantitative method (the questionnaire) allowed us to obtain a small, but representative sample and see what percentage of people faced certain problems after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The interviews allowed us to learn more about these problems and the impact they had on the mobility experience of Russian students. In addition, this method helped not only to identify the fact of the presence of various difficulties, but also their impact on the psychological state of the respondents, which is an important part of the mobility experience. Since the participants in the interview were both students who came to Italy before the outbreak of the war, and those who arrived after the outbreak of the conflict, we were able to consider whether there were any differences in their perception of the experience of studying abroad and overcoming various difficulties that arose in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

2. The time frame of the research

The study had been conducted from the beginning of February until March 19. On February 1, the survey was posted on two telegram channels, the participants of which were Russian students living and studying in Italy. The first interview took place on the tenth of February. The last interview was conducted on March 19th. Then the analysis of the survey results and interviews began.

3. Methodological tools

The research tools used were survey and interview. Next, we will take a closer look at the features of using these tools in research, their advantages and disadvantages.
3.1. Sampling and Questionnaire Administration

The questionnaire was conducted using the google forms service. It contained 13 questions with 8 of them being multiple-choice questions and 5 of them being open questions. At the end of the questionnaire there was a field where respondents could leave their contact information if they wanted to further participate in the research by participating in interviews. A total of 10 Russian students currently living in Italy participated in the interviews. Among them, two are male, and eight are female. All respondents are either currently enrolled or have received education at Italian universities. At the time of the interview, two students had graduated and were seeking employment. Three students had arrived in Italy before the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, while the remaining seven enrolled in Italian universities after the conflict began.

When we deal with the quantitative method - the questionnaire - advantages are

- provides quantitative data for statistical analysis;
- offers insights into the prevalence of various challenges faced by Russian students;
- facilitates the identification of common trends and patterns among the respondents.

The disadvantages of this method are:

- limited depth in understanding individual experiences compared to qualitative methods;
- potential for response bias or inaccuracies in self-reporting.

3.2. Conducting qualitative interviews

After gathering statistical data and obtaining the contact information of students who were ready to continue participation in the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Some of them have been conducted in person, while others have been done with the use of Zoom.

The interviews were conducted to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of Russian students in Italy. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of individual narratives, providing rich insights into the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of
their mobility experiences. All participants were encouraged to articulate their experiences, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the topic. While offering valuable depth and context, qualitative methods are inherently subjective and may lack generalizability. When we are dealing with interviews, especially in the case of semi-structured interviews, where the interviewee has a lot of freedom in answering questions, we must take into account how subjectively these questions are perceived by people. So, the same question can be understood in different ways by different people. On the one hand, this can be considered as a disadvantage of this method, or insufficient attention and scrupulousness of the researcher when compiling questions. However, on the other hand, such subjectivity can shed light on some important points. Looking ahead, in our study some questions were understood differently by interview participants, but we did not intentionally redirect their thoughts in the direction that was originally intended, as a result of which we received varied and versatile material for research.

The interview - qualitative method - has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages:

- provides rich, in-depth insights into individual experiences and perspectives;
- allows for the exploration of complex emotions, attitudes, and motivations;
- facilitates the identification of unique and diverse narratives.

Disadvantages:

- subjectivity in interpreting and responding to interview questions;
- potential for interviewer bias in guiding the conversation;
- limited generalizability compared to quantitative methods.

By integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the impact of Russia's War in Ukraine on Russian student mobility in Italy. The methodological framework outlined in this chapter seeks to balance breadth and depth in understanding, while acknowledging the researcher's positionality and ethical responsibilities. Through these methodological practices, the research seeks to contribute valuable insights to the field of international education and geopolitics.
4. Data analysis techniques

We used descriptive statistics as a technique for analyzing the questionnaire results. Using this technique, we calculated how many survey participants encountered a particular problem, subsequently displaying these results as percentages. This method provides a clear, quantitative overview of the data (Taherdoost, 2020). To enhance the interpretability of the data, graphical representations such as pie charts were employed to illustrate the proportion of respondents affected by each problem.

Narrative analysis, used for analyzing interviews conducted, is one of the most suitable, in our opinion, for understanding the complexity of personal experience. By studying the structure and content of stories, deep insights can be revealed about how people make sense of events, construct their identities, and navigate social contexts (Thuv, 2023). This approach is especially valuable for identifying rich, nuanced perspectives that may be missed by other methods. Additionally, narrative analysis emphasizes the importance of individual voices, often highlighting experiences and perspectives that may be ignored in other research frameworks. This method not only identifies recurring themes and patterns, but also places personal stories within a broader cultural and social context.

To effectively analyze the results, we used integrative analysis, combining quantitative data, such as the percentage of respondents facing each problem, with qualitative data, like respondents' answers, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. Analyzing how quantitative data is supported or explained by qualitative comments helped us to enhance the validity and richness of the research conclusions. For instance, if a high percentage of respondents report facing a particular issue, their detailed comments can reveal why this problem is prevalent and how it impacts their lives.

5. Positionality

Another important moment is the positionality of the researcher in the study. As I am a Russian student in Italy, my personal experiences and perspectives inevitably shape the research process. This positionality influences the choice of research methods and the interpretation of
findings. While my insider status facilitates empathy and understanding, it also introduces biases that must be acknowledged and addressed.

6. Ethics

All the interviews were recorded either with the use of the voice recorder in cases of personal meetings or with the screen recording in cases of Zoom meetings. After fulfilling the aim of this research all the recordings will be deleted and will no longer be used for any other purposes.

All the participants of the questionnaire were informed of the purpose of the study, of the fact that the data provided will remain anonymous and will be processed according to General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679, and were asked to give a consent to the processing of their personal data. All the interview participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interviews.

To preserve anonymity, the names of the students and the universities where they study will not be disclosed. Each student will be assigned a unique number. Below is brief information about the students, including their assigned number, gender identity, and the date and format of their interview.

Student 1 - [1], female, University of Padua, originally from Tambov, 16.02.2024, in person.

Student 2 - [2], female, University of Padua, originally from Saint Petersburg, 21.02.2024, zoom meeting.

Student 3 - [3], female, University of Bologna, originally from Saint Petersburg, 01.03.2024, zoom meeting.

Student 4 - [4], female, University of Padua, originally from Moscow, 08.03.2024, zoom meeting.

Student 5 - [5], female, University of Padua, originally from Saint Petersburg, 11.03.2024, in person.

Student 6 - [6], female, University of Padua, originally from Moscow, 11.03.2024, zoom meeting.
Student 7 - [7], male, University of Pavia, originally from Solnechnogorsk, 19.03.2024, zoom meeting.

Student 8 - [8], female, University of Padua, originally from Novosibirsk, 21.03.2024, in person.

Student 9 - [9], female, University of Padua, originally from Moscow, 22.03.2024, in person.

Student 10 - [10], male, University of Padua, originally from Ufa, 24.03.2024, zoom meeting.
IV. Findings

1. Motivations of Russian students to pursue education abroad

Since the analysis of the existing literature revealed a lack of research on the motivation of Russian students to study abroad, we decided to address this issue in our study. All participants were asked about the reasons compelling them to seek higher education overseas, with a specific focus on their preference for Italy as a destination.

In responses that were given to the question "Why did you decide to study abroad?", a recurring theme emerged: the intrinsic desire to relocate. For many, education abroad represented a gateway to fulfill their aspiration of living in a different country. As one respondent articulated, “I wanted to move in the first place, and studying was an option for moving.” This wish ‘to move’ appeared in other responses too: “I just wanted to move”, “be able to move”, “to go somewhere”, “to go abroad”.

The decision to pursue education abroad was multifaceted, encompassing various factors. First, belief in better education and career opportunities abroad attracted several students. As one student points out, “in science they [in Russia] don't pay much, especially in the environmental field. So there was both a career moment and just a desire to leave”. Positive experiences during exchange programs left lasting impressions, as expressed by one respondent: “I really liked the system.”. Additionally, parental influence significantly shaped students' decisions, with some citing their mother's conviction that higher education in Russia lacked quality, necessitating a move to Europe.

However, motivations extended beyond academic and career prospects. Political and socioeconomic concerns also played pivotal roles. Some students expressed discomfort with the political climate in Russia, prompting them to seek refuge elsewhere. Since the beginning of the mobilization in Russia, many people who did not want to participate in the war, which they do not support, left the country, going to Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan. After the outbreak of hostilities, the government passed a law banning public “discrediting” of the actions of the armed forces, effectively outlawing any statements that differ from the official point of view on a
“special military operation” (The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2023). At the same time, the authorities began blocking social networks and independent media, harshly dispersing protests and exerting pressure on people who oppose the war through the organizations in which they work. Citizens of the country who disagree with the state's policy, both external and internal, are looking for ways to express their disagreement and not become victims of the existing regime. However, in the current situation, this is very difficult, since all dissenters are harassed and detained. Thus, for many people, the only way to avoid unfairness and not become a pawn in the hands of the government was to move. “I was hiding from the politics of the Russian Federation” confided one respondent. Others felt uncomfortable being surrounded by people with whom they did not share the same worldview, and believed they would thrive in an environment with a different mentality.

Parental influence was another prevalent theme, with several respondents acknowledging their parents' influence on their decision to study abroad. “My mother said that I needed to learn English in order to study abroad” recounted one student. This parental guidance in some cases stemmed from a belief that international education offered better prospects for their children's future. And in some cases it is connected with political reasons as well: “Firstly, my parents wanted me to leave, and I think there was always a political motive behind it”.

Speaking about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it is important to say that only one respondent made a decision to study abroad primarily because of the conflict: “From the very beginning of the war, it was scary. I was very scared for my life [...] It was difficult to make plans [...] also because sanctions were imposed [...] And I thought that I needed to move somewhere where there would be more opportunities for me, just as a person. [...] I wanted to find some kind of safe place, which I found.” Nevertheless, for some others it became a very strong push factor, sometimes making them to sometimes forcing them to make decisions in a shorter time frame. As one respondent says, she was uncertain about whether she wanted to go abroad or not, but after the beginning of the war she made her decision quickly, “I was in doubt, I didn't make any decision, and then the war started and I knew for sure that I wanted to leave”. Another interviewee points out that she wanted to have a gap year between bachelor’s and master’s degrees, but had to renounce this desire, “I wanted to take a gap year [...] but because of the war... it served as a catalyst to go as soon as I graduated from my bachelor's degree”. One
more student says that he wished to go abroad one day, but he expected that this would be related to career development, and after the outbreak of the war, he decided to enroll in a foreign university, not only because of the prospects in the future, but also for their own safety: “Before the start of the war, I assumed that somehow in the future I would move from Russia, developing my career, but this was not a clear plan, so I can say that the war accelerated the move”.

Furthermore, the desire to study abroad was often deeply ingrained, originating from childhood dreams of exploring the world and seizing new opportunities. “It has been a dream since childhood” remarked one respondent.

Taking into account all these answers, we can conclude that the most common topics appearing in the students' responses given to the question "Why did you decide to study abroad?" are desire for international experience, quality of education and better future opportunities, escape from political or socioeconomic issues, and the influence of family.

Based on the responses provided regarding why students chose to study in Italy, we may identify several common themes. First and the most commonly mentioned is educational opportunities and scholarships. Many students cited the availability of scholarships and the appeal of specific academic programs as significant factors in their decision. Italy's scholarships, covering tuition and living expenses, attracted students seeking financial support for their studies. “I was given a scholarship that fully covers my studies and allows me to live normally”, “I received a scholarship only in Padua, excellence scholarship... So it's more of a financial moment”, “I liked the university, I liked the program that was interesting to me, and there was a scholarship”, “it just happened so that the program I wanted to study was in Italy.”.

Another popular answer was in one or another way linked to personal connection and familiarity: Some students were drawn to Italy due to personal experiences, such as previous visits, familiarity with the country's culture, or Italy was suggested to them by friends. This familiarity and comfort with Italy played a significant role in their decision-making process: “I've been used to it for a long time and fell in love... with the climate and lifestyle”, “Because my family and I have been vacationing in Italy every year. I really like the nature here, I like the
food.

“I was here on vacation for the first time, I decided, oh, cool, I also I have a friend studying here”, “A friend recommended Italy to me”.

Students also highlighted the ease of access to Italian universities: “Well, I liked the university, I liked the program... And it wasn't that hard to get there, so my choice fell on Italy”, “…it was easy to get here and there shouldn't have been any particular problems with documents”. Some students initially considered other countries; an interesting observation was that some interviewees initially planned to go to Germany but ultimately chose Italy due to various reasons, such as the availability of scholarships, program fit, or geopolitical factors like the onset of war: “Initially, I wanted to go to Germany... But the war started... And in Italy, everything worked out: I liked the university, I liked the program that was interesting to me, and there was a scholarship”, “Initially I considered Germany, but they didn't give me a scholarship”.

These responses highlight the diverse array of factors that influence students' decisions to study in Italy, ranging from academic considerations to personal preferences and external circumstances. Italy's educational offerings, financial incentives, cultural appeal, and ease of access collectively contribute to its attractiveness as a study destination for Russian students.

Overall, these responses give us valuable insights into the diverse motivations guiding Russian students' pursuit of education abroad, with Italy emerging as a favored destination. From aspirations for better educational and career prospects to seeking a way out from political and socioeconomic challenges, the decision to study abroad reflects a complex interplay of personal, familial, and societal factors. Each individual's journey is unique, but the common themes we indicated provide us with the information about the motivations behind the choice to study in a foreign country.

2. Impact of the Ukraine conflict on Russian students studying in Italy

2.1. Sanctions and restrictions

This section presents and analyzes the primary data collected from the questionnaire and the conducted interviews, aiming to thoroughly convey the students' opinions and responses. The
structure is designed to provide an overall picture of the main themes touched upon by the students during the interviews.

The questionnaire asked respondents to describe how specific consequences of the conflict in Ukraine have affected their lives and studies in Italy. The students' answers are illustrated through percentage-based graphs. Additionally, some questions included open-ended responses, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences, which were also analyzed and presented.

2.1.2. Overview of sanctions and restrictions

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western nations including the US, UK, and EU countries, along with Australia, Canada, and Japan, have imposed over 16,500 sanctions on Russia. These sanctions primarily target Russia's economy and key individuals connected to the conflict and human rights abuses. Key sanctions include freezing foreign currency reserves worth $350 billion, banning exports of technology used for making weapons, impounding oligarchs' assets including yachts, and restricting Russia's oil industry through bans on oil and natural gas imports. The G7 has also imposed a maximum price on Russian oil to reduce its earnings (BBC News, 2022).

The EU completely banned the import of Russian fertilizers, wood, coal, steel, iron, seafood and alcohol. A number of Russian banks have disconnected from the SWIFT payment system, and Mastercard and Visa have stopped their activities in Russia. Germany has suspended the certification of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, and the United States has imposed sanctions against its operator (Lenta.RU, retrieved 25.04.2024).

2.1.3. Assessing how restrictions affect Russian students in Italy

The survey participants were asked if they had encountered the problems listed below, and were asked to assess how much this had affected their lives.
Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who to varying degrees encountered or did not encounter financial problems due to the cancellation of the SWIFT system and/or difficulties with the opening of a bank account in Italy. Source: The questionnaire “The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Life of Russian Students in Italy”, 2024.

The first problem listed was concerned with the cancellation of the SWIFT system and/or difficulties with the opening of a bank account in Italy. Six people (12.8%) replied that they did not encounter this problem. Seven people (14.9%) faced a problem, but it did not affect their lives seriously. 19 people (40.4%) said they had encountered a problem and it had affected their lives. For another 15 people (31.9%), the problem has significantly affected their lives.

In the next (optional) question, participants were asked to give a detailed comment on exactly what difficulties they faced. The following difficulties were mentioned among the answers:

- it became difficult to receive any services from Russia due to the SWIFT cancellation;
- difficulties with paying the first installment fee;
- difficulties with opening and using an Italian bank account;
- the necessity to carry a large amount of cash from Russia;
- constant anxiety and search for ways to transfer rubles-euros (ex. cryptocurrency).
All participants of the interviews were also asked if they had encountered any problems related to credit cards, the cancellation of the SWIFT system, and payments of the first university installment.

Respondent 1 recalls that the impossibility to withdraw money from the Russian account was one of the reasons she had to quit her job in Russia. She was engaged in exporting from Russia, and the job was remote. That helped her to have additional money to live in Italy. But when Russian cards stopped functioning abroad and it was not possible anymore to withdraw money, she made a decision to stop working. Although, the respondent mentions that it was not the only reason: “I couldn’t withdraw money regularly, plus I was already tired of work at that time, and it was difficult to deal with work and study at the same time. And so I quit in April 2022” [1].

When asked if she had her cards blocked, the student said that she did not encounter this problem by herself, but heard the stories of other people.

Another respondent says that she had to withdraw all the money from the Russian accounts at the very high exchange rate, which led to the big losses: “I withdrew all the money I could at a double exchange rate, losing half of everything” [6].

As well as a previous student, respondent 6 says her Italian cards were not blocked. But she also continues with telling how her friends had problems with Italian cards, focusing on the case of a friend who had the scholarship card blocked and couldn't use it for five months:

Mine were not, but cards of my group mates were. Their cards were blocked, they had to go to the bank, carry documents, for some of them it took months. Their cards with the scholarship were blocked, and unblocked only four to five months later. And they were constantly asked for some kind of confirmation, etc. And that's exactly what several people had, close friends [6].

Respondent #8 says that she cannot use money that she had on the Russian cards anymore, and specifies that she had euros there too. Then she recalled one more problem she encountered shortly before our interview. She was invited to the bank and warned that her card could be blocked due to her citizenship if she did not provide a document confirming her legal stay in Italy in the near future. Since the interviewee recently graduated (February 2024), she can no longer be considered a student, and she has not yet received a new residence permit:
[..] they called me from the bank and told me I had to come there for an appointment because there were some problems. When I came, they said my card could be blocked soon because I'm Russian. And to avoid it I need to prove that I stay here legally [8].

All three respondents, whose answers are presented above, came to Italy in 2021. As each of them notes, the outbreak of the war came as a surprise to them. None of the respondents had any opportunity to prepare for the consequences and faced the mentioned financial difficulties.

Below we will analyze the answers of people who began their studies at universities in Italy after the outbreak of hostilities and faced other difficulties. One of these difficulties was the payment of the first installment, which students make at the stage of applying to the university.

In some cases students already had bank accounts opened for them outside of Russia. Such as in cases of respondents 2, 3, and 7:

Respondent 2 explains that in 2022 she participated at an exchange program with Turkey, where she was able to open a Turkish account. Later, she used this account to pay the first installment applying to an Italian university. With the same account she managed to transfer some money using the SWIFT system, although she added that she had to ask her friends’ help, because it was impossible to make a transaction directly from her account. As she says: "With huge commissions, but the goal was achieved" [2].

Respondent 3 also had foreign cards and used them to pay the first installment and other university fees. Answering this question she also highlighted that despite the fact she was able to pay all the fees with the foreign cards, some of her friends did not have this possibility and had to search for other solutions.

Student 7 also had a foreign card to use, but he reported having some problems with this card too: "I paid with an Uzbek card, because I have a bank account there, but at the same time, this card was not always accepted, so I had to look for friends here who can just pay for me" [7].

Respondents 4, 5, 9, and 10 say that they had to ask their friends from abroad to pay for them:

Also through friends who live in Finland. I have a classmate there, I asked him to pay in Euros, and then he came here, and I gave him rubles [5].
Another problem faced by people who came to study in Italy after the outbreak of the war was the opening of a bank account. Interestingly, the respondents here provide different information about the work of banks. In the same bank branch, different students from Russia face different situations. So, in one of the interviews, the student said that not all Banca Intesa departments work with international students, but she managed to activate a university card in one of the branches and subsequently even open a new bank account and get a debit card. Then, she said that her friend went to the same department, but unsuccessfully:

_He also wanted to go and open an account, I told him which department to go to. He went there, but they didn't accept him. He ended up going to another place [5]._

Judging by the information received from some respondents, it can be generally said that Italian banks allow students to activate cards issued by the university (although sometimes there are some problems), but refuse to open new bank accounts for Russian students. As one of the students’ comments on it: _“this is the most pressing issue when all banks simply refuse to open an account for you when you say that you are from Russia”_ [4]. Before the start of the war, people did not face such a problem.

In general, information regarding the operation of banks and the opening of bank accounts is very ambiguous. Based on how students answer questions about opening accounts, it can be concluded that they take information from the thicket of all existing Russian-language chats, as well as from the words of their friends, which suggests that there is a lack of reliable source of information:

_Regarding the card, I read in the chat that I can’t get a card without a residence permit, they refuse to do it. There was such information for a while. And I decided to wait for a residence permit. Then I found out that a student card can be activated without a residence permit, but I decided to wait for a residence permit anyway [9]._

Despite the fact that people who arrived in Italy after the outbreak of the war had time to prepare themselves to the possible problems that may occur due to the political situation and sanctions imposed on Russia and its citizens, and already at the stage of preparation for admission these students were looking for various ways to solve problems (_Well, on my way_
here, I was already assuming that some difficulties might arise [9]), one common difficulty for students who arrived before the outbreak of the war and after is that they cannot receive financial support from Russia. At least, the way it was possible before. Some of the respondents receive scholarships, and some have some kind of job here in Italy (such as laboratory assistant, for example), and still many are forced to transfer money from Russia. Here, students had to look for different ways to convert Russian rubles into euros. Respondent 6 shared how she searched the ways to convert the currency. She studied how Peer to Peer platforms work, looked for people in Kazakhstan who could help to withdraw money. What is important is that in such cases you have to give your money to a person you do not know, which may be potentially unsafe. Such a way of converting currency always implies some degree of risk. She also mentioned that she studied everything about Bitcoins.

Student 9 also had to study how cryptocurrency function, because at some point she did not have another money, and there was no other way to get it: “I still didn't have enough, and I transferred another 30 thousand rubles through the crypt”.[9]

Respondent 5 shared her stories about getting money from Russia. One way was through the friends of her mother in Kazakhstan, who transferred money to her using their cards. Another way was the agreement with other friends of her mother, who live in Germany now.

My mother has friends who live in Germany, and their parents are in Russia. Previously, they regularly transferred money to their parents in Russia. And when the war started, they lost the opportunity to help their parents, and we had such an exchange. They gave me Euros, my mother gave their parents rubles [5].

She also recalls a situation that happened to her once, when she tried to get money from Germany. The transfer was blocked by the bank. Then she came to the bank to resolve the situation and bank employees started to ask her questions: “They asked me, ‘Who is this person? How do you know him?’ I said, this was my friend. ‘Why is he transferring money to you?’ I said that I was a student, I needed money for living, for rent”.[5]

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3 Peer-to-peer platforms where two users can interact with each other without any third party. It is possible to use these platforms to send money.
The narratives captured provide a comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by Russian students studying in Italy after the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. These testimonies highlight the difficulties encountered by students, particularly concerning banking and financial transactions. We can identify three main problems that Russian students in Italy are currently facing:

1. Difficulties with opening a bank account: Russian students in Italy face challenges in opening bank accounts, with inconsistent experiences reported across different branches.

2. Difficulties in transferring and receiving funds from other countries: The cancellation of the SWIFT system complicates international fund transfers for Russian students, leading to reliance on alternative methods such as cryptocurrency or assistance from friends and family abroad. Bureaucratic barriers and inconsistent banking practices further exacerbate these challenges, highlighting the need for accessible support for students.

3. Difficulties in paying the first University installment: Students encounter obstacles in paying initial university fees, often resorting to seeking assistance from friends abroad.

What becomes evident is the students' resilience and resourcefulness in navigating these difficulties, often relying on personal networks or trial-and-error approaches for solutions. However, a glaring gap exists in the absence of a centralized and reliable source of information to aid students in addressing these issues.

The primary goal of sanctions is to influence the population of a targeted country, encouraging them to advocate for changes in their government. However, this strategy often fails to achieve its intended outcome. Instead, it tends to exacerbate the existing human rights issues, further harming citizens who are already experiencing violations of their rights. This issue has been addressed in previous research (e.g. Peksen, 2009), and our study reinforces this notion once again.
2.1.4. Changes in traveling experience after the war

8. I have difficulties with movement between Italy and Russia.

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who to varying degrees encountered or did not encounter difficulties with movement between Italy and Russia. Source: The questionnaire “The Impact of the Russia - Ukraine Conflict on Life of Russian Students in Italy”, 2024.

The next question in the questionnaire was whether students had difficulty moving between Russia and Italy. Of the respondents, only two students replied that they did not encounter this problem, or it did not affect their lives in any way. Most of the respondents, namely 20 people (42.6%), replied that this problem had a sufficient impact on their lives. 16 people (34%) replied that problems with moving significantly affected their lives. Another 9 people (19.1%) faced the problem, but it did not have a strong impact on their lives.

In the next (optional) question, participants were asked to give a detailed comment on exactly what difficulties they faced. In general, the following problems can be identified:

- due to the lack of direct flights between Russia and Italy the time that students spend on the road has significantly increased, often two or more days;
- the cost of tickets has increased greatly;
- due to the lack of direct flights, people who have not yet received a residence permit cannot fly home (without a valid residence permit or visa, students have the right to travel only by direct flights between the country of which they are citizens and Italy).

Further, all interviewees were also asked what difficulties they faced when moving between Russia and Italy.
Two of the interviewed students, both enrolled and arrived in Italy in September 2021, were in Russia on vacation at the time of the outbreak of the war. This is how they describe their experience of living through these events and returning to Italy:

*I was trying to figure out what was going to happen [...] When I saw that the flights to Italy were canceled, I thought, ‘Oh my God, how should I fly?’ [...] I monitored a lot of things, and eventually bought tickets through Air Serbia. That is, I planned to fly back here in early March, and flew at the end of March. [...] It wasn't just one day, I spent the night there [in Serbia]. That was another story. I had to go to a cheap hotel, where there were reviews about the guy that he was kind of molesting someone. But there was no choice. And moreover, he took me to the wrong place.* [1]

*I did not believe that this was happening and began to understand the whole situation when the flights started to be canceled. I bought a ticket for the beginning of March to Venice. And this had a very strong effect on how I had to come back later, because I came back in the process of this whole situation. Thank God, I was told that it was possible to cross the border by land [...] And I went through St. Petersburg, then through Estonia and Riga, and from there by plane. As a result, the whole journey took about three days instead of four hours [from Moscow] [8].*

Both of these stories show how unprepared people were for what happened. They were forced to look for ways to return to Italy, still in shock from what was happening. Both students were scared that they could remain locked up in their country without the possibility of returning to continue their studies. The cost of tickets also changed significantly. Respondent 1 says: “*In my opinion, it cost me 40 000 rubles then [400 euro]. But considering that I flew here in 2021 with Aeroflot for 20 000 rubles [200 euro], this is a significant increase. Maybe even 50 000 rubles [500 euro], but definitely not more*” [1].

Due to such an increase in prices students try to save money spent on moving as much as possible. So the student notes that she stayed in the cheapest hotel, where according to reviews ‘*the guy that he was kind of molesting someone*’ [1].

Other respondents also note the significant change in prices. Respondent 6 explains that she came to Italy together with her son. The child comes back to Russia (Moscow) twice a year to
his father. He usually travels through Istanbul, and the price of the ticket in one direction, according to the words of the interviewee, is about 800 - 1000 euro. She also recalls that before the conflict there were flights with the price of 70 - 100 euro.

Continuing the topic of prices, let us turn to the answers of other students:

*In winter, I had to pay about 70,000 rubles [700 euro] to go home [St. Petersburg] and return here to Bologna [3].*

*About 200 euro was a ticket from Yerevan, and about 13,000 rubles [130 euro] was a flight from Moscow to Yerevan [9].*

*I bought tickets back in August, and then the ticket cost 35,000 rubles [350 euro], but due to the delay with the visa, I had to reschedule the ticket several times, and the total amount was somewhere around 60,000 rubles [600 euro] [From Moscow via Istanbul] [10].*

As we can clearly see, the prices have changed dramatically. Studying abroad often turns out to be expensive for students anyway, so such price increases have a very strong impact on the students' budget.

Travel has become not only more expensive, but also physically more difficult. According to respondents, the road between Italy and Russia now often takes more than one day. It is also worth considering the need to spend the night in another country, the need to carry a heavy suitcase, change time zones, as well as money spent on the road (transport, food, housing).

Sometimes, as in the case of one of our interviewees, the long road may become a problem for the document's issuing. The student that was travelling from St. Petersburg to Italy via Helsinki planned to stay at her friends’ home, but to get her Italian visa she had to show an hotel reservation:

*When I applied for a visa, they asked me where the hotel booking was for that night. Because I had a flight only the next day. That is, I was supposed to spend the night in Finland, and the next day I was going to Italy. They asked where the booking was, where I would spend the night. I said I was staying at my friends’. They asked where the invitation letter from my friends was. I had to reserve a hotel right at the visa application center [5].*
Another respondent notes that she feels disconnected from her family and expresses great sadness that she cannot see her parents more often not only because of the high tickets’ prices but also because it is difficult for elderly people to fly with airplane changes. It is physically hard for them to spend so much time in the planes. She expresses her feelings saying “I feel disconnected from my family, and it's hard that I can't see my parents more often” [6].

So far, we have been talking about travel in the sense of moving between Russia and Italy. Below we will look at how the war affected the travel experience of Russian students in general. Students were asked if they travel around Italy or Europe in general and then were asked if the travelling experience has changed after the beginning of the war. Some of them did not travel a lot. Some say that things did not change a lot in regards to travelling. Answering this question, people once again highlight the problems with credit cards they face, like respondent 4 and respondent 3:

Yes, of course, it has changed. Basically, the problem is with the credit cards, because everywhere you have to pay, book. [...] I'm lucky, there weren't any problems. I know those who were asked at the border... and someone had problems with B&B, so it feels like... I don't really want to travel because of this, to plan anything [3].

- Has the situation affected travel here in any way?

- No, I wouldn't say that. Only if it's a financial issue, as always. But this indirectly has a great impact, because my parents can’t help me, they can’t send money because of the sanctions. And that's why it's very difficult to deal with it somehow [4].

Although sometimes people say that nothing has changed, the way they describe their experience reveals some changes in their perception of travelling and of themselves as travellers. For example, one student, answering a question about travel, says that nothing has changed, and then describes how she was afraid that someone would start asking her questions:

I was preparing a speech that I was a Russian student, ‘please don't kick me out’, but everything went smoothly [5].
Later on, answering another question, she mentions again the topic of travelling, and says the following things:

\[...\] even though I really like to travel, I'm afraid to go, because I'm afraid that they will not accept my documents and deport me. I don't want to be tied to any one country and be trapped in Russia [5].

This suggests to us that sometimes people do not even realize how the military conflict has affected their lives, perhaps because they did not have extensive travel experience before that, and they simply do not know what it was like before the war began.

The same theme of being asked to show the documents and feeling bad about it is traced in another interview with the student 2:

Rather, I feel more anxious that people will ask and see my documents and will look at me suspiciously. [...] I feel ashamed in front of myself that I really apologize for it [for the Russian citizenship] [2].

Also, students say that they feel uncomfortable meeting Russian-speaking people, because they do not know their nationality and cannot predict their reaction:

We have already avoided the Blabla car [...] a lot of drivers were Ukrainians. And if a person is Russian-speaking, you never know which country a person is from, what attitude they have, how they will react to you [2].

It was very scary to meet Russian-speaking people, because I did not understand whether they were Russians or Ukrainians, and I constantly felt guilty [8].

Student 2 recalls a situation that happened to her once when she booked a hotel for her vacation and her booking was canceled at the last minute because the hostess was Ukrainian and she did not welcome Russian people. The respondent declared she felt extremely bad because she was waiting for this trip for a long time and booked the accommodation eight months prior. Close to the date of arriving she claims she got a message saying, “cancel the reservation”. During the interviews, she proceeds with expressing her disappointment and telling that after the
situation she started to write accompanying comments to all her reservations that says, “We’d like to inform you that we are from Russia, sorry, we hope this will not be a problem for you”.

Another student describes the situation when she and her friend lived in a hotel where the manager was Ukrainian and says that they felt awkward and even a little scared. But everything turned out to be fine. As she continues:

[…] we were just too suspicious, because after that there were no problems, the manager even helped us and told us how to get where we needed to go. In general, the first year was very awkward, and it affected the travel experience too [8].

To sum up, the accounts provided in the questionnaire shed light on the profound impact of geopolitical events, particularly the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, on the lives and travel experiences of Russian students enrolled in Italian universities. Several key themes emerge from the narratives:

1. Challenges in Moving Between Russia and Italy: The lack of direct flights between the two countries has significantly increased travel time and costs for students, forcing students to find alternative routes and accommodations, often at higher expenses.
2. Financial Burden: The soaring prices of airline tickets have placed a considerable financial strain on students, forcing them to seek budget options, endure longer journeys, and compromise on comfort and safety during travel.
3. Disconnection and Emotional Strain: Students express feelings of disconnection from their families due to the difficulty and expense of traveling between Russia and Italy, highlighting the human cost of restricted mobility.
4. Impact on General Travel Experience: The conflict has also affected the overall travel experiences of Russian students in Europe. Increased scrutiny and discomfort when encountering Russian-speaking individuals, together with anxieties about document checks have altered perceptions of travel safety and freedom.
5. Unforeseen Challenges: Unpredictable situations, such as last-minute accommodation cancellations due to host nationality, illustrate the complexity of navigating travel arrangements amidst geopolitical tensions. Such experiences contribute to a sense of unease and uncertainty among travelers.
In conclusion, the testimonies underscore the multifaceted ways in which geopolitical conflicts ripple through individuals’ lives, reshaping travel experiences, straining financial resources, and deepening emotional burdens. These narratives highlight the importance of understanding the human dimensions of geopolitical events and the need to pay attention to the mobility limits and the negative psychological implications not only with reference to those who are directly affected (Ukrainians, in our case) but also to other groups who might also be experiencing difficulties. By broadening the focus, a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to movement can be achieved.

2.1.5. How have the students’ perception of safety and intercultural communication changed after the beginning of the war?

9. The attitude of others towards me has changed.

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who to varying degrees experienced or did not experience the change of the attitude towards them after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict.

Source: The questionnaire “The Impact of the Russia - Ukraine Conflict on Life of Russian Students in Italy”, 2024.

The next two questions are closely connected with the previous section concerning travelling and we will discuss them together. In question 9 the respondents were asked whether they experienced the change in attitude towards them from other people. Here the results show that the majority - 28 people (59.6%) - did not encounter this problem or it did not affect them. 16 people (34%) encountered the problem, and only 3 people responded that they noticed the change of attitude that affected their lives, for 1 person - significantly.
People were also asked to answer the question in more detail. The following answers were received:

- the attitude of my Italian friends, as well as acquaintances from other countries, remained the same. At first, there was a lot of talk about the conflict, but now people usually do not remember it;
- in the first months it was unpleasant when I went to the hospital and the doctor told me that I was Russian, how wrong we were, how cruel we were. I'm sorry, did I come to the hospital or to a political show;
- sometimes they refuse to rent a house/check into a hotel because of my citizenship. They look suspiciously;
- more demands from border guards and bank employees;
- they refused to sell the item in a store in Milan.

10. I was/have been afraid to speak Russian or demonstrate in any other ways that I was Russian.

47 responses

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who to varying degrees experienced or did not experience fear of speaking Russian or demonstrating in any other ways that they were Russian. Source: The questionnaire “The Impact of the Russia - Ukraine Conflict on Life of Russian Students in Italy”, 2024.

In question 10, the students were asked if they were afraid to demonstrate their nationality to other people. 18 people (38.3%) replied that they did not encounter this problem. The same number of people faced a problem, but it did not affect their lives seriously. 7 people (14.9%) said they had encountered a problem and it had affected their lives. For another 4 people
(8.5%), the problem has significantly affected their lives. Then the respondents described their experience in more detail. Most people say that they were afraid or embarrassed to speak Russian at the very beginning of the war:

- in 2022, it was scary and embarrassing to speak Russian on the streets, but it did not bring any significant consequences;
- in 2022, it was extremely awkward at the exchange in Siena immediately after the start of the SMO [special military operation], especially in front of Ukrainians;
- at first it was incomprehensible and embarrassing to speak Russian, now it's calmer, because foreigners react normally;
- in 2022 it was scary, now I'm not afraid to say that I'm from Russia.

There were also other responses:

- it wasn't scary, there was a desire to constantly make excuses;
- I've never been afraid, it's me, I'm Russian. Go for three letters, your problem;
- I don't speak Russian only in front of Ukrainians;
- I speak Russian with children, I am happy and very proud;
- sometimes it's scary to speak Russian because of possible conflicts.

One respondent made a very important remark answering the question “Were you afraid to speak Russian?”: Only at first, mostly a feeling imposed by propaganda, as for me. But I constantly get questions from relatives and friends from Russia, "how do they treat me (or us Russians) there?"

As we can see from the charts, students mostly were not affected by the change of attitude of other people. In the responses given by the students participated in interviews it is also seen that students did not face direct discrimination. many students mentioned the presence of support from other people and genuine interest:

I was surprised when I realized that some people here sympathize with Russians [1].

It was more that people were interested, but I only came across very polite people who asked me carefully if I was okay with talking [4].
But everything was fine, everyone treated me well, and at first, there were conversations about it, we often discussed it, but no one ever said that he thinks that because I'm Russian, I'm also to blame for all this, because they understand perfectly well [8].

While some students expressed encountering positive and supportive attitudes from locals, others described instances of discomfort or tension, particularly when interacting with individuals from countries with strained relations with Russia. Thus, respondent 5 recalls two situations when she felt uncomfortable talking with people from other countries. At the same time, she admits that these feelings were not provoked by aggressive or judgemental behaviour but rather by her own expectations and impression of hostility and prejudices.

I had nothing against her, but I felt some kind of tension, maybe I imposed it on myself, that she had some prejudices about me, that I was Russian, she was Ukrainian, well, yes. [...] I have a an Erasmus classmate from Lithuania, when we met, she said, “I'm from Lithuania”, I said, “I'm from Russia”, and so... Well, maybe it's just my perception that they look at me with hostility [5].

This suggests that while cases of discrimination might be rare, there are still underlying tensions and prejudices that can manifest in certain situations.

There's a notable theme of internalized apprehension or shame regarding the Russian identity of respondents, which can be traced both in answers to the questionnaire and in responses to the interviews’ questions. Despite this initial unease, many students reported gradually becoming more comfortable with their nationality and language over time, reflecting a process of normalization and self-acceptance.

When I started going to classes, when it all started, saying that I was from Russia was... it felt like some kind of guilt at first. But everyone treated me very nicely [3].

At first I was afraid, then it became easier. I guess I just realized that it wasn't that scary. I'm still Russian, it's my language [5].

Student 9 shares her experience of going to a Ukrainian doctor. She said that she felt ‘very awkward’ and was ‘very ashamed’, but the doctor was friendly and treated her very well. The girl also said that the day before the interview she went to a movie about Mariupol (a city in
Ukraine). There were many Ukrainians there too, and after the film it was “embarrassing to look them in the eye” [9].

Within academic settings, only one student highlighted instances where professors expressed negative attitudes towards Russians or the conflict, emphasizing the need for addressing institutional biases and promoting inclusive environments, although she did not experienced it herself:

And we wrote petitions to stop any bullying by teachers, so that political topics at the university would not be raised at all, because, well, not personally with me, I heard repeatedly that professors spoke very negatively about Russians and started discussing military actions during classes. [...] Well, I say, I did not directly encounter it, but I had a friend, [...] the professor almost yelled at her, she had to argue with him [6].

Importantly, the experiences of Russian students in Italy are also influenced by external perceptions and concerns, with some students expressing anxieties stemming from friends and family back in Russia about potential discrimination or harm abroad. The same theme we have already seen in one answer to the questionnaire.

[...] in Russia they make us think that everyone hates us all here [in Europe]. Even when I was at home, they kept bothering me, "How is it? Didn't you get expelled?" [1].

There were some hints of discrimination from Russia, from my family and my friends from Russia. They were afraid all the time and thought that I was being bullied, beaten, and all that. They were very afraid that I might be beaten up somewhere and asked me not to speak Russian on the streets [8].

Overall, the experiences of Russian students in Italy during this period reflect a complex interplay of support, sympathy, tension, and prejudice. Despite the general perception that the conflict might have led to widespread discrimination, the majority of respondents did not report significant changes in the attitudes of others towards them. The detailed responses reveal a spectrum of experiences, from supportive and sympathetic attitudes to isolated incidents of discrimination and prejudice. Some students described initial apprehensions and a sense of guilt about their Russian identity, which, over time, evolved into greater acceptance and
normalization. This internalized apprehension, often influenced by external propaganda and concerns from family and friends back in Russia, underscores the psychological impact of the conflict on these students.

Furthermore, while positive interactions were commonly reported, there were specific instances where students felt unwelcome or faced challenges, particularly in formal settings such as renting accommodations, dealing with border guards, and shopping. Within academic settings, concerns about potential biases from professors were raised, although direct experiences of discrimination were not prevalent.

2.2. The role of the university

Next, we will delve into another crucial topic: the role the university plays in the lives of Russian students during the war. During the interviews, all participants were asked whether the university had provided any assistance after the outbreak of the conflict. It is important to note that participants interpreted this question in various ways. For some, it primarily referred to psychological support, while others considered financial assistance or the university’s role as a means for relocation. This diversity in understanding underscores the multifaceted ways in which universities can impact the lives of students during such challenging times, from providing emotional and mental health support to offering financial aid and facilitating safer living arrangements.

The responses reveal a mixed assessment of the university's support during the war. While some students highlighted proactive and practical measures taken by the university, such as offering psychological support, addressing bureaucratic issues, and maintaining open and prompt communication, a significant number of students felt left to deal with their problems on their own. For instance, one student noted the quick and clear responses to emails and the welcoming attitude even before officially becoming a student, which contrasted with their previous experiences in Russian institutions: “No one divided us, we were all together. Everyone who enrolls, they are equal; the university immediately answered all questions by mail, which for me was surprising. The last university [in Saint Petersburg] never replied to me by mail in my life” [2]. At the university where participants enrolled, professors and administrative staff made efforts to ensure that the academic environment remained a "safe place," offering reassurance
and practical help like facilitating job opportunities within the university to ease financial burdens.

I had savings, my mother helped me, but it was very difficult to transfer money here, plus the course the ruble exchange rate has fallen significantly, my parents helped me in any way they could, but some additional money was needed. And so my teacher hired me, she just opened a vacancy for me in the assistance [...] I think it was really a help to me, at least I could pay the rent with the money that I was paid [5].

The same student (5) recalls the situation when her university professor helped Russian students to get to the summer school, in which they were not allowed to participate initially.

However, six out of ten students expressed that the university did not significantly help them. Student 3 recounted how, despite initial reassurances that their program would continue unaffected, it was eventually closed, leaving students to navigate financial and logistical challenges independently.

Some students did not seek or expect assistance from the university: Well, I didn't actually ask for any help. And in what sense? Psychological support? [...] I did not ask for any help or support. Well, on my way here, I was already assuming that some difficulties might arise. It wasn't like I expected the university to solve all this for me [9].

Others felt that more targeted and consistent help could have been extended given the extraordinary circumstances:

So, the university did nothing to help, nothing. And we wrote petitions and requests. What's that got to do with us? We live here, we are here, we are pacifists. Why should students suffer in this situation? [6].

Respondent 7, when asked about the university's help, responded that the university provided crucial support simply by existing. For him, gaining admission to an Italian university offered a legal pathway to relocate to a safer and more promising environment. He elaborated on how the university facilitated the process of obtaining a visa and opening a bank account, which were
essential steps in establishing his new life. He emphasized the peace of mind that came from knowing he was in a secure setting, away from the conflict. This relocation not only ensured his physical safety but also opened up new opportunities for personal and academic growth, illustrating the profound impact that university support can have on students fleeing tumultuous circumstances.

*I know that tomorrow I will go to university, study quietly, return home and be happy. This is the most important thing in my life.* [7]

The response of student 4 highlights the indirect benefits of being enrolled. Unlike friends who moved to Georgia or Armenia and struggled to find meaningful activities, the student found that the university provided a crucial distraction and sense of purpose. The academic engagement helped her avoid the aimlessness that others experienced. However, she noted a lack of active assistance from the university beyond the general provision of psychological support.

*The fact that I have something to do, that I did not just leave, as I have friends who just left at the first opportunity for Georgia, Armenia and they are looking for some kind of activity, that is, they try to occupy themselves. I have something to distract myself with – the university. But there is no active help from the university, well, except for, I know, they offer psychological help.* [4]

Overall, while the university's role in the lives of these students was significant in offering some stability and psychological help, there were notable gaps in addressing the specific and evolving needs of Russian students during this hard period. This underscores the importance of academic institutions in not only providing education but also adapting their support systems to better serve their international student communities in times of global crises.

### 2.3. The change of the future perspectives

In this section, we explore how the war has reshaped the future prospects for students in Italy. When asked, "Have your plans for the future changed since the onset of the war?" many respondents revealed that the conflict had prompted them to consider relocating. Some mentioned that the situation had not significantly altered their plans. However, most spoke of the plans they had just before the hostilities began or the adjustments they made shortly thereafter.
because the focus of the question was on how the beginning of the conflict affected the students' decision-making. However, one of the interview participants touched on a very important topic when answering this question. Namely, career prospects, which is extremely important for students. Therefore, we will analyze this particular case.

The respondent has been planning to move to Italy for several years, having in mind a plan of what kind of education she wants to get here and what to do after graduation.

*I have worked all my life in the organization of events, an event manager, that is, large conferences, B to B, for different companies. I also studied here for a master's degree in strategic communications, and I wanted to continue organizing events [6].*

After graduating from the university in October 2023, she began looking for a job, also in the field of event management. According to her, there used to be many companies in the region of Italy where she currently lives that cooperated with Russia and Russian speakers have been in high demand. After the outbreak of the war, many Italian companies stopped cooperating with Russia. This had an impact, of course, on the number of jobs for Russian-speaking employees. At the moment, almost all industries that are of interest to our respondent are looking for employees with knowledge of French or German. As the respondent herself says: “*the demand in the Russian language is practically zero*”.

Additionally, she is contemplating whether Italian employers have any bias against Russians. However, this is a complex issue. As she elaborates, “*They will never say it to your face why you were not hired, because you are Russian or for some other reason*”.

And yet, she further shares a story where, as she believes, her employer refused to hire her because of the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine.

*I had an interview, while studying, at a very interesting organization. It was literally a week before the war; no one knew anything about it yet. The interview was great. The director told me how many times he had been to Moscow, how much he loved Moscow, balalaika, vodka, everything. That's it, we agreed that I start working soon, he liked everything, I'm waiting for the answers on document issues. The war begins, and I immediately get a refusal, without explanation. It was very clear that this was related to this situation, and not to any other [6].*
Even though a rejection cannot definitively be attributed to the war, it is clear that many Italian and Russian companies have ended their partnerships. As a result, specialists with knowledge of the Russian language are now less in demand in Italy. This change creates challenges for those who planned to seek employment in fields like event management, tourism, and hospitality.

Our respondent's experience shows what problems Russian students may face in the future due to the war. The destruction of professional ties and possible prejudices in hiring present difficulties in finding employment. The termination of partnerships between Italian and Russian companies has reduced employment prospects. This situation hinders career mobility, making it difficult for students to find employment and choose a professional path.

In conclusion, we note that the war has affected the career mobility of Russian students in Italy, reducing employment opportunities and introducing potential biases. This case study highlights the impact of geopolitical events on professional mobility.

2.4. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive insight into the multifaceted challenges faced by Russian students in Italy following the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Through detailed narratives and testimonies, several key themes have emerged, highlighting the profound impact of geopolitical events on these students' lives. These themes include difficulties with banking and financial transactions, challenges in paying university fees, increased travel burdens, emotional strain, and the broader socio-economic repercussions of sanctions. This concluding section synthesizes these findings.

**Economic Impact:** Sanctions have contributed to economic instability in Russia, leading to inflation, currency devaluation, and decreased purchasing power for ordinary citizens. Restrictions on international financial transactions and freezing of foreign currency reserves have made it challenging for Russian individuals and businesses to access foreign currency and conduct transactions abroad. This affects students studying abroad who rely on financial support from Russia or need to transfer funds for tuition and living expenses.

**Mobility and Travel:** Sanctions also impact the ability of Russian students to travel abroad and back to the home country due to restrictions on flights, visa requirements, and financial barriers.
Additionally, diplomatic tensions between Russia and other countries may lead to increased scrutiny and delays in documents processing for Russian citizens and a more thorough inspection at the airport. At the same time, difficulties arise not only from other countries, but also from the Russian state, as some students note.

**Psychological Impact:** One of the most common effects produced by sanctions and war are, of course, psychological problems, which include increased anxiety, a sense of insecurity, fear of rejection by others, stress caused by other consequences of sanctions, leading to feelings of alienation and discomfort in host countries. Sanctions and geopolitical tensions may also affect social dynamics and relationships within the international student community. Russian students may experience strained interactions with peers from other countries, heightened political polarization, and challenges in maintaining cross-cultural relationships.

**Access to Education and Opportunities:** Sanctions may indirectly impact Russian students' access to educational opportunities abroad. Restrictions on imports of technology and limitations on academic cooperation between Russia and other countries could affect research collaborations, academic exchanges, and access to cutting-edge resources and technologies.

**Employment Challenges:** The termination of cooperation between many Italian and Russian companies has also led to a decreased demand for specialists with knowledge of the Russian language in Italy. This poses significant challenges for Russian students and graduates who had planned to seek employment in various sectors, where previously Russian native speakers were needed.

All these factors have an impact on the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy.
V. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore how the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has changed the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy. Our analysis of existing literature revealed a significant gap in research concerning international students from countries heavily impacted by sanctions, with most studies focusing on Iranian students. Our research aims to bridge this gap by exploring the experiences of Russian students in Italy after the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the war that followed and is still running. The findings indicate that international sanctions introduced towards the Russian Federation negatively affect these students' mobility experiences without achieving the desired outcomes. As a result, the findings of this study raise questions about the effectiveness of measures such as sanctions; a concern echoed in previous studies (e.g., Peksen, 2009). Sanctions complicate international travel, financial transactions, and access to educational opportunities, such as attending certain conferences.

Another important aim of the study was to explore how international political conflicts impede the experiences of international students. While much attention is rightly given to the direct victims of the conflict — mostly, Ukrainian citizens in this case — our research focuses on the indirect effects on Russian citizens, such as Russian students abroad. Despite many Russian students in Italy do support their home country's policies over the “special military operation”4 and often leave for political reasons, they still suffer due to their nationality. This is particularly evident in travel and tourism, where presenting a Russian passport can lead to discomfort and prejudice. Respondents reported that the conflict negatively affected their travel experiences, making them feel uneasy about disclosing their Russian identity. They must often inform accommodation providers of their nationality in advance, as some refuse to house Russians. Additionally, financial difficulties stemming from sanctions make travel more challenging. Given that students contribute significantly to tourism in their host countries (Shanka, Ali-Knight & Pope, 2002), it is essential to consider the broader economic impacts of international conflicts and sanctions on tourism and host economies.

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4 Медведев объяснил, почему на Украине идет спецоперация, а не война. (2022, June 3). РБК. https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/06/2022/629936b49a7947e357c8d6ad
Sanctions have exacerbated financial difficulties for Russian students, complicating basic banking and financial transactions. The inability to easily transfer funds and the inconsistency in banking practices have forced students to rely on alternative methods, such as cryptocurrency or financial support from friends and family abroad. As it was previously discussed in other studies (e.g., Johansson, 2013) policymakers need to take into account the unintended impacts of sanctions on innocent people and the effects these measures can have on societal dynamics and stability.

The conflict and related sanctions have also had a psychological impact on Russian students. Feelings of isolation, fear of discrimination, and the burden of navigating bureaucratic hurdles have heightened emotional stress. At the same time, we can note that such feelings are often caused more by the expectation of a negative attitude towards Russians, rather than by clear evidence of discrimination and Russophobia. In contrast to the evidence presented in the articles of Jack (2022) and Bhargava (2024) that Russian students experience Russophobia while studying in some countries, only a small percentage of participants in our study indicated that their nationality influenced the attitude of others towards them.

The university's role in the lives of Russian students in Italy offers a kind of “mooring” infrastructure (Söderström, 2013). The university provides a vital support system for many students, helping them navigate difficult times by offering a material anchor space and a space for meaning-making. One respondent highlighted that staying busy with university activities helped them cope, while another emphasized that the university provided the stability and confidence they desperately needed. We believe that the role of the university as a place of mooring should be studied better, since it was the university that gave the interviewed students the opportunity both to move and to rest, enacting im/mobilities dynamics that greatly influenced the lives of Russians students in Italy.

Addressing the lack of research on the motivations of Russian students to study abroad, and their perception on their own im/mobility condition, our study delves into their reasons for choosing higher education overseas, particularly in Italy. The responses reveal diverse motivations, ranging from aspirations for better educational and career prospects to escaping political and socioeconomic challenges. These insights illustrate the complex interplay of
personal, familial, and societal factors influencing their decisions. Each student's journey is unique, yet the common themes identified offer a comprehensive understanding of why Russian students choose to study in foreign countries, with Italy emerging as a favored destination in the sample considered.

It is important to note that the study faced several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data collection was limited to self-reported experiences, which could introduce representational bias. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and incorporate multiple data sources to validate the findings. Moreover, considering that the researcher is a member of the study group – Russian students in Italy – this factor could influence the objectivity and reliability of the result interpretation. On the other hand, this position of the researcher helps to better understand and interpret the responses of the study participants, as well as pay close attention to the existing problems faced by Russian students.

On the other hand, as noted at the beginning of the work, this study seeks to examine the current situation not from the point of view of global influence, but from the point of view of the impact on the daily life and mobility experience of some representatives of the studied group. During the study, participants shared stories from their personal lives, their experiences and difficulties. That is why this work can be considered part of the research conducted “through the lens of the intimate” (Barabantseva, Ní Mhurchú & Spike Peterson, 2021, p. 343)

In the future, the study could be expanded by reviewing and analyzing more data in order to study in more detail the impact of wars or other kinds of geopolitical conflict on students' lives. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how students' experiences and coping mechanisms evolve over time. Additionally, comparative studies between different host countries can shed light on how varying institutional policies and geopolitical contexts influence student experiences.

In summary, our study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Russian students in Italy after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. These findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the impacts of international sanctions and conflicts on the mobility, financial stability, and overall well-being of international students.
VI. Conclusion

This thesis sets out to investigate how the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has influenced the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy. Through a comprehensive analysis of both existing literature and original research, this study has illuminated the multifaceted impacts of geopolitical conflicts and international sanctions on the lives of these students.

The literature review highlighted a significant research gap regarding international students from heavily sanctioned countries, with most prior studies focusing on Iranian students. Our research addresses this gap by exploring the unique experiences of Russian students, revealing that sanctions negatively impact their mobility without achieving intended political outcomes. Sanctions complicate travel, financial transactions, and access to educational opportunities, thereby affecting students' academic and personal lives.

The findings indicate that the international political conflict has indirectly impacted Russian students. Despite many of these students not supporting their home country's policies and often emigrating for political reasons, they still face prejudice and financial difficulties due to their nationality. The study revealed that these students experience discomfort and discrimination when traveling, with some accommodations refusing to house Russians. Financial sanctions have further complicated their lives, making basic banking and financial transactions challenging and forcing them to seek alternative methods like cryptocurrency. This raises the question of the fairness and effectiveness of the policies directed towards Russia, which seem to impact the lives of those who do not support the military actions in Ukraine more significantly than those who initiated and are participating in these actions.

Psychologically, the conflict and sanctions have heightened feelings of isolation and emotional stress among Russian students. However, the concept of "mooring" emerged as a significant finding, emphasizing the university's role as a vital support system. The university provided structure, stability, and a sense of purpose, helping students cope with their challenging circumstances.

At the same time, the research highlighted several areas that academic institutions should focus on. Specifically, it would be beneficial for institutions to maintain closer contact with
international students, identifying existing challenges and assisting in their resolution. Additionally, creating an information hub would be useful, providing students with updated information on all matters related to documentation and financial issues. For example, this hub could offer guidance on which bank branches allow account openings and what documents are required for this process.

Our research also delved into the motivations behind Russian students choosing to study abroad, particularly in Italy. The study found that students are driven by a combination of better educational and career prospects, as well as a desire to escape political and socioeconomic challenges at home. These motivations are complex and multifaceted, reflecting a broader narrative of seeking opportunities and safety in a foreign land.

This study acknowledges its limitations, including a relatively small sample size and the potential for self-reported bias. Future research should aim for larger, more diverse samples and consider multiple data sources to validate findings. Additionally, the researcher's positionality as a member of the study group could influence the interpretation of results, which future studies should account for.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to a nuanced understanding of the impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on the mobility experiences of Russian students in Italy. The findings highlight the need for a more empathetic and comprehensive approach to supporting international students affected by geopolitical conflicts. As international students continue to play a crucial role in the global educational landscape, it is imperative to consider the broader implications of conflicts and sanctions on their lives. This study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and future researchers, emphasizing the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by students from conflict-affected regions.
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Annex 1. The structure of the questionnaire

The Impact of the Russia - Ukraine Conflict on Life of Russian Students in Italy

Purpose
The following questionnaire is intended to collect information about the impact of the Russia - Ukraine conflict on the mobility experience of Russian students in Italy. The questionnaire's target audience is Russian students who have spent at least one semester in Italian university.
The data collected will be analyzed and used in the context of the Master's thesis that I am writing for the Mobility Studies program at the University of Padua.

Time needed and data security
The questionnaire will last about 5 minutes, while the data provided will remain anonymous and will be processed according to General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679.

Instruction
Please fill out the questionnaire by answering all mandatory questions (marked with an *) to be able to move forward. For any further information, clarification or question relating to the compilation of the questionnaire, do not hesitate to contact me at: anastasiia.petukhova@studenti.unipd.it.
Thank you so much for your time and contribution!

* Indicates required question

1. I give my consent to the processing of my personal data *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes

2. 1. Age *

Mark only one oval.

☐ 18 - 21
☐ 22 - 25
☐ 26 - 30
☐ 30 +
3. **2. Sex** *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male
- Female

4. **3. Where are you from? (city in Russia)** *

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5. **4. Are you an exchange student or a self-enrolled student?** *

*Mark only one oval.*

- I'm an exchange student
- I'm a self-enrolled student

6. **5. What level of degree are you pursuing in Italy** *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- PhD

7. **6. When did you arrive to Italy?** *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Before 2022
- 2022
- 2023
- 2024
Please answer below whether you have encountered the following problems and to what extent they have affected your life. After each compulsory question you will have one non-compulsory question where you can specify your answer or give some details.

8. **7. I have financial difficulties connected with the cancellation of the SWIFT system and/or difficulties with the opening of a bank account in Italy.**

   *Mark only one oval.*

   - [ ] did not encounter/did not affect me
   - [ ] encountered/did not affect me much
   - [ ] encountered/affected my life
   - [ ] encountered/affected my life significantly

9. **7(a). Please, feel free to provide any relevant information connected with the previous question.**

   
   
   
   

10. **8. I have difficulties with movement between Italy and Russia.**

    *Mark only one oval.*

    - [ ] did not encounter/did not affect me
    - [ ] encountered/did not affect me much
    - [ ] encountered/affected my life
    - [ ] encountered/affected my life significantly
11. 8 (a). Please, feel free to provide any relevant information connected with the previous question.

12. 9. The attitude of others towards me has changed. *

   Mark only one oval.
   
   ☐ did not encounter/did not affect me
   ☐ encountered/did not affect me much
   ☐ encountered/affected my life
   ☐ encountered/affected my life significantly

13. 9 (a). Please, feel free to provide any relevant information connected with the previous question.

14. 10. I was/have been afraid to speak Russian or demonstrate in any other ways * that I was Russian.

   Mark only one oval.
   
   ☐ did not encounter/did not affect me
   ☐ encountered/did not affect me much
   ☐ encountered/affected my life
   ☐ encountered/affected my life significantly
15. 10(a). Please, feel free to provide any relevant information connected with the previous question.


16. 11. I worried/have been worried about my family/friends back home. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ did not encounter/did not affect me
☐ encountered/did not affect me much
☐ encountered/affected my life
☐ encountered/affected my life significantly


17. 11 (a). Please, feel free to provide any relevant information connected with the previous question.


18. 12. Did you encounter other problems or do you think you have been affected in ways not previously listed?


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19. Did you plan going back to Russia after getting your degree in Italy before the Russia-Ukraine war?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- More yes than no
- More no than yes
- No

20. Would you be available for an interview on Zoom to clarify some of the aspects touched in this questionnaire? If you are, please list your email (or other form of contact) below.


Annex 2. The structure of interviews

1. When did you come to Italy?

2. Why did you want to study abroad and why did you choose Italy?

3. What difficulties, concerning the mobility aspects of your choice, have you faced during the preparation stage on your way to study in Italy?

4. Was the period of adaptation easy or difficult for you?

5. Did you miss home? Did you have a desire to quit and go back to Russia?

6. How did you find out about the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war? Did you expect it to happen? What was your reaction?

7. Was or is any of your family or friends in the combat zone?

8. Have your mobilities (study mobilities, working mobilities, tourism mobilities) plans for the future changed because of the war? Do you see these mobilities in a different way now?

9. Do you think the fact that you have been an international student in Italy during the war had/has a positive or negative impact on your experience of living through these events?

10. Has your university helped you in any way in this period?