Crisis-activated diaspora: Tatar migration, memory, and connectivity in the shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Tatar migration to Kazakhstan and the subsequent transformation of diaspora identity and consciousness. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Almaty in 2023, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with recent Tatar migrants and established diaspora members, the research reveals complex processes of identity negotiation and memory work within the Tatar diaspora. The study introduces the concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness to describe intensified processes of identity negotiation and community formation catalyzed by acute geopolitical events. Key findings include the intricate navigation of multiple frames of belonging among Tatar migrants, generational variations in approaches to identity, the crucial role of digital technologies in shaping diaspora experiences, and the active reinterpretation of diaspora history in light of current events. The research contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about the nature of diaspora and diasporic memory in an era of global mobility and geopolitical instability, emphasizing the need for more dynamic, process-oriented approaches to understanding diaspora formation and maintenance. While limited by its focus on a single ethnic group in a specific geopolitical context, this study opens new avenues for understanding the complex processes through which diasporic identities are negotiated and reimagined in response to global events.

Introduction

The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has had far-reaching impacts beyond the immediate conflict zone, triggering new patterns of mobility and disrupting established notions of home and belonging across the post-Soviet space. This study examines one dimension of this broader upheaval by focusing on the experiences of ethnic Tatars —the largest minority group in Russia—who have migrated to Kazakhstan in the wake of the invasion, and their interactions with the established Tatar diaspora community there. Through an ethnographic exploration of Tatar consciousness in flux, this research contributes new insights to theoretical debates on the nature of diaspora and collective memory in times of geopolitical crisis.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, rooted in long-standing tensions over Ukraine's geopolitical alignment and contested historical narratives, has resulted in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II (UNHCR, 2023). Beyond the outflow of Ukrainian refugees, the conflict has also spurred significant emigration from Russia itself (Mukhina, 2023). While precise figures are difficult to ascertain, estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens have left the country since February 2022, driven by factors including opposition to the war, fear of political repression, economic instability, and avoidance of military mobilization (Kuleshova et al., 2023; Wachs, 2023; Kasyanchuk, 2024). Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan have been major destinations for this new wave of Russian emigration due to visa-free entry policies and cultural-linguistic ties (Dadabaev and Sonoda, 2023).

The invasion has also had a significant impact on the diverse ethnic groups within Russia. For example, there is the case of Russian Buryat immigrants who chose Mongolia as their country of exile due to its geographical proximity. In this case, it is pointed out that the war-related movement across the Russia-Mongolia border evoked varying degrees of sympathy in Mongolia based on the historical and linguistic ties of the Mongolian Buryats (Takakura et al., 2024).

Within this broader exodus, the experiences of ethnic minorities like Tatars warrant particular scholarly attention. As the largest ethnic minority in Russia, numbering over 4.7 million, Tatars have a complex history of mobility and diaspora formation across the post-Soviet space (Garipova, 2020; Sakurama-Nakamura, 2024). The current crisis-driven migration of Tatars to Central Asia both builds upon and disrupts historical patterns (Azatlıq radiosı, 2023), raising important questions about the nature of diasporic consciousness and identity in times of geopolitical upheaval.

This study aims to illuminate these dynamics through an ethnographic exploration of Tatar experiences in Kazakhstan centered on the following research questions:

1. How do recent Tatar migrants from Russia negotiate their sense of identity and belonging in the wake of crisis-driven displacement?
2. In what ways does the arrival of new migrants' impact self-understanding within the established Tatar diaspora community in Kazakhstan?
3. How can the Tatar case contribute to theoretical debates on the nature of diaspora and diasporic memory in the 21st century?

To address these questions, the study draws on the survey conducted in Almaty, Kazakhstan in September 2023, encompassing participant observation and in-depth interviews with both recent Tatar migrants from Russia and members of the long-established diaspora community. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals navigating shifting notions of home, identity, and community in a time of geopolitical crisis.

Theoretically, the study builds upon and extends recent developments in diaspora studies and memory studies. Moving beyond classical conceptions of diaspora as defined by a collective myth of homeland and desire for return, it engages with more fluid, processual understandings of diaspora as a mode of consciousness characterized by multi-locality and the negotiation of multiple frames of belonging. The paper also draws on theoretical work emphasizing the multidirectional and palimpsestic nature of diasporic memory, exploring how collective narratives of the past are mobilized and reinterpreted in light of present crises.

Through this theoretical framing, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates about the nature of diaspora in an era of intensified global mobility and digital interconnection. By examining how Tatar diasporic consciousness is being reimagined and reconstructed in the wake of geopolitical upheaval, the research provides new insights into the generative potential of crisis for diaspora formation. It also advances understanding of the complex memory work involved in negotiating diasporic identity across multiple temporal and spatial frames of reference.

Theoretical framework: reimagining diaspora and diasporic memory

Evolving perspectives on diaspora

Classical approaches to diaspora, exemplified by Safran's (1991) influential work, tended to define diasporas as bounded ethno-national communities characterized by dispersal from a homeland, collective memory and myth about the homeland, alienation in the host society, and desire for eventual return. While these frameworks provided useful starting points for diaspora studies, they have been critiqued for essentializing diasporic identities and reifying notions of homeland and return (Clifford, 1994; Anthias, 1998). Cohen (2008) further developed this typology, identifying common features of diasporic groups such as traumatic dispersal, strong ethnic group consciousness, and idealization of the ancestral home.

More recent scholarship has moved towards conceptualizing diaspora not as a fixed category or bounded group, but as a stance, a claim, or a mode of consciousness (Brubaker, 2005; Quayson and Daswani, 2013). This "diaspora turn" emphasizes the processual, relational, and situational nature of diasporic identifications. As Brubaker (2005:13) argues, we should think of diaspora "not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim." This perspective highlights how diasporic consciousness emerges through practices of memory, performance, and claims-making rather than being an inherent quality of particular groups. Axel (2004) further complicates this by proposing the concept of the "diasporic imaginary," emphasizing how diasporas are constituted through shared imaginings and practices that may not always be tied to a physical homeland.

Building on this, scholars like Quayson and Daswani (2013) have called for greater attention to the temporalities and spatialities of diaspora formation. They argue that diasporas are produced through complex negotiations across multiple temporal and spatial frames, rather than simply through orientation to a singular homeland.

This multi-scalar approach opens up new ways of conceptualizing how diasporic consciousness is activated and reshaped in particular moments of crisis or upheaval. Sökefeld (2006) emphasizes the importance of "critical events" in catalyzing diasporic mobilization, while Mavroudi (2007) highlights the fluid and contextual nature of diasporic identities in response to changing political circumstances.

Recent work has further complicated understandings of diaspora by emphasizing the role of digital technologies in shaping diasporic experiences and connections. Diminescu's (2008) concept of the "connected migrant" highlights how digital communication enables migrants to maintain simultaneous connections to multiple places, blurring distinctions between 'here' and 'there.' Building on this, Alinejad (2019) explores how social media practices create new forms of

diasporic co-presence and emotional connection across distances. Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018) further develop the concept of "digital diasporas," examining how online practices reshape notions of belonging and community among dispersed populations. They argue that digital platforms create new forms of belonging and community that transcend traditional notions of homeland and host country. Building on this, Alinejad and Ponzanesi (2020) explore the concept of "digital atmospheres" in diasporic contexts, highlighting how digital media create affective environments that shape experiences of belonging and displacement. This perspective offers valuable insights into how geopolitical crises like the Ukraine conflict can rapidly mobilize diasporic sentiments through digital channels.

The transnational turn in migration studies has also influenced diaspora scholarship. Vertovec's (2009) work on transnationalism emphasizes how migrants maintain multi-stranded social relations linking their societies of origin and settlement. This perspective challenges simplistic notions of diaspora as disconnected from homelands, highlighting instead the complex, ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging across transnational social fields.

Goździak and Main's (2020) work on "transnational identities in crisis" offers valuable insights into how geopolitical upheavals reshape diasporic consciousness. Their study of Ukrainian diaspora mobilization in the wake of the 2014 Crimea annexation provides a useful comparative framework for understanding the Tatar case.

These theoretical developments provide a foundation for examining how Tatar diasporic consciousness is being reimagined and reconstructed in real-time through the encounter between recent crisis migrants and established diaspora communities. Rather than assuming a pre-existing Tatar diaspora defined by orientation to a fixed homeland, this study explores diaspora as an ongoing process of identity negotiation shaped by both geopolitical events and everyday practices of connection and memory-making.

New directions in memory studies

Parallel to developments in diaspora studies, the field of memory studies has also seen important theoretical shifts in recent years. Moving beyond Halbwachs' (1992) foundational work on collective memory as bounded within particular social frameworks, scholars have increasingly emphasized the dynamic, contested, and multidirectional nature of memory work.

Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory has been particularly influential in rethinking how collective memories interact across cultural and temporal boundaries. Rejecting the notion that memories of different historical traumas compete in a zero-sum game for recognition, Rothberg argues that memory is instead "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (2009:3). This multidirectional model opens up new ways of conceptualizing how diasporic groups may mobilize and reinterpret diverse historical narratives in making sense of present crises.

Building on this, Erll's (2011) work on travelling memory emphasizes how mnemonic practices and narratives circulate across cultural and media contexts, creating palimpsestic layers of meaning. For diasporic communities, this travelling of memory across space and time creates complex webs of reference that inform identity construction in the present. Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory further elucidates how memories of traumatic events are transmitted across generations in diasporic contexts, shaping the identities of those who did not directly experience the events in question.

Recent scholarship has further developed these ideas by examining the role of digital media in shaping collective memory practices. De Cesari and Rigney's (2014) work on transnational memory highlights how digital networks enable new forms of mnemonic connection and collaboration across borders. Similarly, Smets et al. (2019) explore how social media platforms

become sites for negotiating diasporic identities through shared memories and cultural references.

The concept of "prosthetic memory" developed by Landsberg (2004) offers another valuable perspective, highlighting how mass media and new technologies allow individuals to take on memories of events they did not personally experience. This has particular relevance for understanding how diasporic communities engage with and internalize historical narratives from distant homelands.

Scholars have also emphasized the political dimensions of diasporic memory work. Tölölyan (2007) examines how diasporas engage in "memory industries" that produce and circulate narratives about homeland and history. These memory practices often serve political purposes, shaping group identities and mobilizing diasporic communities around particular causes (Adamson, 2008).

These developments in memory studies provide valuable tools for analyzing the memory work involved in diaspora formation. Rather than assuming a singular, static collective memory of homeland, they allow us to examine how multiple historical narratives and mnemonic practices are mobilized, reinterpreted, and layered in the process of negotiating diasporic identity.

Theoretical framework and limitation

Drawing together these recent developments in diaspora studies and memory studies, this paper advances a theoretical framework for understanding diaspora as an ongoing process of identity reconstruction activated through encounters across difference and the multidirectional mobilization of memory. Rather than conceptualizing diaspora as a fixed state of longing for return to a singular homeland, it examines how diasporic consciousness emerges through the negotiation of multiple spatial and temporal frames of reference.

This framework allows for an exploration of how geopolitical crises like the Ukraine conflict can serve as generative moments for reimagining diaspora. By destabilizing taken-for-granted notions of home and belonging, such crises create openings for new articulations of diasporic identity that draw on diverse historical narratives and cultural resources.

Through applying this framework to the case of Tatar migrants and diaspora communities navigating the fallout of the Ukraine conflict, the study aims to make several theoretical contributions:

Firstly, it advances understanding of the generative potential of crisis for diaspora formation, moving beyond models that assume fixed diasporic attachments. By examining how Tatar diasporic consciousness is being actively reimagined in response to geopolitical upheaval, the study contributes to debates on the fluid and situational nature of diaspora.

Secondly, it provides empirical insights into the multidirectional memory work involved in negotiating diasporic identity across multiple frames of reference. Building on Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory, the study explores how Tatars mobilize and reinterpret diverse historical narratives in making sense of their current situation.

Thirdly, it offers a case study in how diasporic consciousness is reshaped through encounters between crisis migrants and established diaspora communities, contributing to debates on the relational nature of diaspora. This builds on recent work emphasizing how diasporic identities emerge through practices of connection and negotiation across differences (Alinejad, 2019; Smets et al., 2019).

Finally, it extends theoretical discussions of diaspora beyond the dominant focus on postcolonial contexts to examine diaspora formation in the post-Soviet space. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature exploring the specificities of diaspora experiences in this region.

While this theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the dynamics of diaspora formation in times of crisis, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the focus on a single ethnic group (Tatars) in a specific geopolitical context (post-Soviet space) may limit the generalizability of findings to other diasporic communities. The unique historical and cultural factors shaping Tatar experiences may not be directly applicable to diaspora formation in other contexts. Secondly, the emphasis on crisis as a catalyst for diaspora consciousness, while valuable for understanding acute moments of change, may understate the importance of long-term, gradual processes in shaping diasporic identities. The framework may need to be complemented by approaches that can account for subtler, incremental forms of identity negotiation.

Despite these limitations, by bringing these theoretical perspectives to bear on ethnographic data, the study aims to contribute new insights to ongoing debates about the nature of diaspora and diasporic memory in an era of intensified global mobility and geopolitical instability.

Research methods and data

Research design and data collection

The research design centered on an ethnographic survey conducted in Almaty, Kazakhstan in September 2023. Almaty was selected as the primary field site due to its status as one of major destinations for recent emigrants from Russia and its historically established Tatar diaspora community. The data collection process involved two primary methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Participant observation was carried out at the local Tatar Cultural Center, which serves as a hub for both recent migrants and the established diaspora community. The researcher regularly attended events and classes at the center, allowing for observation of interactions between these groups and facilitating informal conversations about experiences of migration and diaspora. Detailed field notes were taken to document observations and informal discussions, providing rich contextual data to complement the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the second major component of data collection. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 individuals, including both recent migrants from Russia and members of the established Tatar community in Almaty. These interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were conducted in Russian or Tatar, depending on participant preference. The interview guide covered topics including migration experiences, sense of identity and belonging, interactions within the diaspora community, and reflections on collective memory and cultural heritage.

The use of in-depth interviews is particularly appropriate for this study given its focus on subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. As Seidman (2013) notes, in-depth inter-viewing allows researchers to understand how participants make sense of their experiences and place them in context. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to explore emergent themes while ensuring coverage of key topics across interviews.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Initial contacts were made through the Tatar Cultural Center, with subsequent participants recruited through referrals. This approach allowed for the inclusion of individuals with diverse experiences and perspectives within the Tatar community.

The final sample of 21 interview participants included 12 recent migrants (having arrived in Kazakhstan since February 2022) and 9 members of the established diaspora community.

Participants ranged in age from 20s to 60s and included roughly equal numbers of men and women. Occupations varied widely, including students, IT professionals, teachers, and retirees.

While this sample is not statistically representative, it provides rich insights into a range of experiences within the Tatar community in Almaty. The combination of recent migrants and long-term diaspora members allows for exploration of how diasporic consciousness is negotiated across different temporal frames.

Given the sensitive nature of discussing experiences related to the Ukraine conflict, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant identities.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed alongside field notes using thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was conducted inductively to identify key themes emerging from the data. These initial codes were then refined and organized into broader analytical categories through an iterative process of coding and memo-writing.

Throughout the analysis process, attention was paid to how individual narratives connected to broader theoretical debates around diaspora and collective memory. The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was employed to identify patterns and variations across different participant groups.

Survey limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this survey. As a qualitative investigation based on a small sample in one urban location, the findings are not generalizable to all Tatar migrants or diaspora communities. Additionally, the researcher's positionality as someone with Tatar heritage but raised outside the "homeland" may have influenced interactions with participants. Reflexivity about this positionality was maintained throughout the research process.

Despite these limitations, the rich, in-depth data generated through this ethnographic approach provides valuable insights into processes of identity negotiation and memory work within a diaspora community navigating geopolitical crisis.

Negotiating identity in the wake of crisis: narratives of recent Tatar migrants

Motivations for migration: between push and pull factors

The decision to leave Russia was framed by most participants as a difficult choice driven by a combination of push and pull factors. Many cited fears about political instability, economic uncertainty, and the possibility of military mobilization as key motivators for leaving. Marat (male, born in 1992, from Kazan), an IT professional who moved from Kazan to Almaty with his family, explained:

> When the war started, it became unclear whether we could lead a normal life in Russia in the future. I was afraid of losing my job due to economic sanctions. Considering my children, I wanted them to grow up in a stable environment. If I stayed in Russia, I didn't know when I would be sent to a war zone... (interviewed on 3 September 2023)

His wife Alina (female, born in 1991, from Kazan) echoed these concerns about family security: "I didn't want to involve my children in the war. I love Russia, but in that situation, the safety of my family was the top priority." (interviewed on 3 September 2023)

For others, the decision to leave was framed in more explicitly political terms. Ilina (female, born in 1973, from Moscow), a former university lecturer in Moscow, articulated her departure as a moral stance:

> I couldn't support Putin's decision. My uncle said, 'I couldn't support Putin's decision.' My uncle said, 'If you stay in Russia now, you will become an accomplice. If you truly love your homeland, you need the courage to turn your back on it.' I couldn't stay in Russia any longer, thinking that I would be complicit in that madness. (interviewed on 2 September 2023)

These narratives reflect the complex interplay of political, economic, and personal factors driving migration decisions in the context of geopolitical crisis. They also highlight how the conflict has destabilized notions of homeland and belonging, forcing individuals to reconsider their relationship to Russia as a political and cultural entity.

Negotiating loss and reconstruction of home

For many participants, the experience of leaving Russia was characterized by a profound sense of loss and dislocation. Rustam (male, born in 1983, from Kazan suburbs), who emigrated from the suburbs of Kazan, expressed the emotional toll of displacement:

> I never thought I would leave Russia. Leaving the land where I was born and raised was like losing half of myself. I miss the beautiful scenery of Tatarstan, the gossip with the neighborhood aunties, and the Sabantuy festivals we all gathered for... (interviewed on 8 September 2023)

Kamil (male, born in 1980, from Penza), a medical worker from Penza, conveyed an even more poignant sense of conflict:

> Leaving our hometown was a really painful choice for us. But for the sake of our children, we can't stay in Russia. But then again, do I have the courage to start a new life in an unfamiliar land... There were many days when my wife, children, and I spent crying after deciding to leave the country. (interviewed on 3 September 2023)

These narratives evoke what Brah (1996) terms the "homing desire" often associated with diasporic experiences—a longing for a place of belonging that may no longer exist in the form remembered. However, as recent scholarship has emphasized, such experiences of loss do not necessarily translate into a desire for literal return to a homeland (Quayson and Daswani, 2013). Instead, they often catalyze processes of reimagining home and belonging in new contexts.

For some participants, the process of settling in Kazakhstan involved actively reconstructing a sense of home through connections with the local Tatar community. Dina (female, born in 1991, from Ufa), who emigrated from Ufa, described how engagement with Tatar cultural practices in Almaty sparked a new awareness of her ethnic identity:

> It was only after coming here that I started to have deep relationships with Tatars of my generation. To be honest, when I was in Russia, I wasn't conscious at all of being Tatar. Rather, I felt a complex about not being able to speak the Tatar language. But here, I have made many Tatar friends, and its fun to study the mother tongue together and make traditional dishes. I've come to feel that I want to cherish my roots. (interviewed on 1 September 2023)

Iskhak (male, born in 1986, from Bugulma), who emigrated from Bugulma, shared a similar experience of rediscovering his Tatar identity:

> When I was in Russia, even though I knew I was Tatar, I didn't think it was my identity. Rather, I had a strong sense of being born in the Soviet Union... of being a Soviet person. But after coming to Almaty and getting involved with the Tatar community in this city, I feel like I've finally been able to face my roots. Gathering with friends in the same situation, joking in the Tatar language, and sharing memories of our hometowns. Such times make me realize that I am Tatar. (interviewed on 10 September 2023)

These narratives illustrate how displacement can paradoxically lead to a strengthening of ethnic identification and engagement with cultural practices. It aligns with Clifford's (1994) observation that diasporic experiences often involve complex processes of both "losing" and "finding" cultural connections.

Navigating multiple frames of belonging

A recurring theme in participants' narratives was the challenge of navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting, frames of belonging. Many expressed a sense of being caught between Russian, Tatar, and Kazakhstani cultural and political contexts, struggling to articulate a coherent sense of identity. Mansur (male, born in 1981, from Kazan), who moved from Kazan to Almaty, articulated this complexity:

> When my Kazakh colleagues say things like, 'It may be hard for you to fit into our society because you're Tatar from Russia,' I feel really uncomfortable. It's true that I have a Tatar identity, and my mother tongue isn't perfect either. But then again, I'm not just Tatar, you know. Russian is also my language, and I want to cherish Russian culture too. And as a generation that knows the Soviet era, I haven't lost my sense of being a Soviet citizen either. So, Tatar, Russian, Soviet, in Kazakhstan... all those different identities are mixed together. It's not something that can be easily divided. (interviewed on 6 September 2023)

Ilmira (female, born in 1979, from Ufa), an artist from Ufa involved in support activities for migrants in Almaty, expressed a similar sense of being caught between multiple belongings:

> The Tatar community in Kazakhstan welcomes us migrants with open arms. But at the same time, I sometimes feel uncomfortable. The thing is, they really demand 'Tatarness' (татаростъ) from us. If you can't speak the Tatar language, you get teased that you're not a 'real Tatar.' But I believe I have a Tatar identity even if I can't speak the Tatar language. (...) Also, the Tatars here are firmly rooted in Kazakh society. They can speak the local language and have many Kazakh friends. But we migrants are shaky in both Kazakh and Tatar, and we haven't assimilated into society. So while I envy them, I also feel a sense of alienation. In the end, I feel like we don't fully belong anywhere... (interviewed on 9 September 2023)

These narratives vividly illustrate what Vertovec (2001) terms "multi-locality" in diasporic consciousness—the simultaneous orientation to multiple places and cultural frames. It also reflects more recent theoretical emphasis on the fluid, situational nature of diasporic identifications (Brubaker, 2005). Rather than a fixed attachment to a singular homeland, these experiences exemplify the ongoing negotiation of multiple belongings characteristic of contemporary diasporic experiences.

Generational dynamics in identity negotiation

The research revealed significant generational variations in how participants approached questions of identity and belonging. Older participants often framed their experiences through the lens of Soviet-era internationalism, while younger migrants tended to emphasize ethnic Tatar identity more strongly. Ilina (female, born in 1973, from Moscow), in her 50s, noted this generational divide:

> Young people seem to be very conscious of their Tatar identity. They study the Tatar language hard, wear traditional costumes, and participate in festivals. That passion is a bit hard for us older people to understand. For our generation, we were Soviet citizens first and Tatars second. So honestly, it's more natural for us to miss the Soviet Union of that era than our ethnicity. (interviewed on 2 September 2023)

Her son Musa (male, born in 1999, from Moscow), in his 20s, offered a contrasting perspective:

> I think my mother romanticizes the Soviet era. But I learned in school that even the Soviet Union had a policy of Russification. I think it's the responsibility of our generation to take pride in being Tatar. Of course, I want to cherish Russian culture as well. But at the same time, we have to face our roots properly. I guess there's a difference in perspective between my mother and me in that regard. (interviewed on 2 September 2023)

Timur (male, born in 1994, from Kazan), who emigrated with his wife and children, revealed an even more diverse intersection of awareness:

> I want my children to cherish their identity as Tatars. Especially now that we've left our homeland, we need to be aware of our roots. My wife says, 'Now we have to think about becoming Kazakhstanis,' but... On the other hand, my parents' generation doesn't seem to understand our enthusiasm. Even my father, who still lives in Kazan, says things like, 'Whether you're Tatar or Russian, there's no point in saying that now. It's okay to be Soviet citizen.' To be honest, I often feel a gap between parents and children. (interviewed on 11 September 2023)

These intergenerational differences highlight how collective memories and historical narratives shape diasporic consciousness in complex ways. They exemplify what Hirsch (2012) terms "postmemory" —the relationship of younger generations to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.

Digital technologies and transnational connections

The survey revealed that digital technologies played a crucial role in shaping the experiences of Tatar migrants and their connections with both their homeland and the diaspora community. Many participants described how social media platforms, messaging apps, and online forums facilitated the rapid exchange of information, memories, and cultural practices across borders. Marat (male, born in 1992, from Kazan), the IT professional who moved from Kazan, explained how digital platforms helped him maintain connections with his homeland while forging new ties in Kazakhstan:

> Telegram groups have been a lifeline for us. We have one for Tatars who recently moved to Almaty, where we share everything from job opportunities to recipes for traditional dishes. At the same time, I'm still part of groups with friends and family

back in Kazan. It's like living in two worlds simultaneously. (interviewed on 3 September 2023)

Dina (female, born in 1991, from Ufa), the blogger from Ufa, described how social media allowed her to reconnect with her Tatar heritage:

> I started following Tatar language learning accounts on Instagram after moving here. It's amazing how much you can learn just scrolling through your feed. I've also connected with Tatars all over the world through these platforms. We share old photos, songs, and stories about our grandparents. It makes me feel part of something bigger, even though we're all scattered. (interviewed on 1 September 2023)

These narratives illustrate Diminescu's (2008) concept of the "connected migrant," highlighting how digital technologies enable migrants to maintain simultaneous connections to multiple places and communities.

The crisis in Ukraine also intensified the use of digital platforms for information sharing and community organization. Ilmira (female, born in 1979, from Ufa), the artist involved in support activities, explained:

> When the conflict started, our Telegram channel exploded with activity. People were sharing news, helping each other find safe routes out of Russia, and offering support to newcomers in Almaty. It was chaotic but also beautiful to see how quickly our community mobilized online. (interviewed on 8 September 2023)

This rapid digital mobilization exemplifies what we might term "crisis-activated digital diaspora," where geopolitical events catalyze intense online activity that shapes diasporic consciousness and solidarity. This practice aligns with Alinejad's (2019) observations about how social media can create new forms of diasporic co-presence and emotional connection across distances.

These examples demonstrate how digital technologies are integral to the formation and maintenance of diasporic identities in the contemporary era, especially in times of crisis. They facilitate the rapid circulation of memories, cultural practices, and real-time information, contributing to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of diasporic consciousness.

Transformations in the established diaspora community

Mobilizing collective memory in migrant reception

The arrival of new migrants has catalyzed significant transformations within the established Tatar diaspora community in Almaty. Many long-term diaspora members framed their response to new migrants through the lens of historical memories of Tatar migration and displacement. Azat (male, born in 1953, Kazan), who experienced migration to Almaty in the 1960s, emphasized the moral imperative of assisting newcomers:

> When we Tatars in Kazakhstan arrived in this land, our ethnic compatriots who had been rooted in this land since the imperial period extended a helping hand to us. Therefore, accepting compatriots in the same situation now is our moral obligation. We are ethnic compatriots who share the same homeland and origins. (interviewed on 12 September 2023)

Malika (female, born in 1954, Almaty), a pensioner, shared a similar narrative that highlighted the intergenerational transmission of memory:

> My mother migrated from Aktanysh in the 1930s. My grandmother, who settled in what

is now Almaty with her young mother, said that the Tatars who had lived in this land since the imperial period helped her very much. Not only that, but she said that the Kazakhs also helped her immensely. Thanks to them, our family was able to put down roots in this land. My mother always said never to forget that kindness. That's why for me, helping compatriots in difficult situations is a responsibility I inherited from my mother. As a fellow Tatar, I think now is the time to repay that kindness. (interviewed on 7 September 2023)

This narrative illustrates how collective memories of past migrations are mobilized to make sense of and respond to current crises. It aligns with Erll's (2011) concept of "traveling memory," showing how mnemonic narratives circulate and are reinterpreted across temporal and spatial contexts. However, the reception of new migrants was not universally positive. Some established diaspora members expressed skepticism about accepting newcomers, highlighting tensions within the community. Damir (male, born in 1985, Almaty), who has been involved in Tatar organizations in Almaty for many years, voiced reservations:

Why do we have to take care of those who have fled from Russia? Those of us who have lived here for a long time have completely different backgrounds from them. To be honest, our organization doesn't have much leeway in its operations, and I'm reluctant to allocate resources for new migrants. (interviewed on 4 September 2023)

Raushan (male, born in 1951, Ulyanovsk), an elderly member of the community, expressed a more nuanced view:

When I moved to Almaty when I was young, how much help did I receive from the people in the neighborhood? That's why I think it's only natural to help our compatriots. But the young people who have come recently don't know much about this history. They have a different perspective from us. There are aspects where it's not easy to say we're the same Tatars. (interviewed on 6 September 2023)

These contrasting perspectives reveal how the arrival of new migrants has prompted a renegotiation of what it means to be part of the Tatar diaspora in Kazakhstan. They highlight the contested nature of diasporic memory and identity, aligning with scholarly emphasis on diaspora as a claim or stance rather than a fixed category (Brubaker, 2005).

Reinterpreting diaspora history in light of current events

The crisis has also prompted a reexamination of Tatar diaspora history in Kazakhstan, with many participants drawing parallels between past and present migrations. Gulnaz (female, born in 1954, Almaty), a local historian, articulated how current events have shaped her understanding of Tatar-Kazakh relations:

I study the history of the Tatar diaspora in Kazakhstan. It is true that the Tatars who migrated to Central Asia during the Soviet period received a great deal of help from the Kazakhs. But even before that, Tatars had been active in this land as merchants and artisans, contributing to Kazakh society. That's why I think we were able to build a relationship where we could help each other in times of need. I believe that properly recognizing such history leads to the stability of multi-ethnic Kazakhstan. (interviewed on 12 September 2023)

Farid (male, born in 1970, Almaty), an entrepreneur actively involved in supporting new migrants, shared how he uses historical narratives to frame contemporary solidarity:

Just the other day, we held an event titled 'Kazakhs and Tatars have been friends since ancient times.' There, I spoke about the history of Kazakhs helping Tatars during

the Soviet era. The Kazakh guests in the audience were also nodding. We Tatars are trying to demonstrate our raison d'être in Kazakhstan by appealing to such historical ties. (interviewed on 10 September 2023)

This narrative exemplifies what Rothberg (2009) terms "multidirectional memory," showing how memories of different historical periods are brought into dialogue to make sense of the present. By emphasizing long-standing Tatar contributions to Kazakh society, these accounts also serve to legitimate the contemporary Tatar presence in Kazakhstan in a time of heightened migration.

Shifting self-perceptions within the diaspora community

Interactions with new migrants have catalyzed shifts in self-perception among established diaspora members, prompting many to reconsider their own relationships to Tatar language and culture. Aigul (female, born in 2000, Almaty), a young Almaty native involved in volunteer work with migrants, described how these encounters have transformed her sense of identity:

> Actually, I can hardly speak the Tatar language myself. My parents were also educated in Russian, so we've always used Russian at home. To be honest, I was indifferent to my roots. But when I talk to the migrants, they are desperate to learn the Tatar language. They say they want us younger generation to inherit it properly too. I was really struck when I saw a mother in front of me appealing with tears in her eyes. I'm ashamed to say that I feel like I learned the importance of 'being Tatar' from the migrants. (interviewed on 10 September 2023)

Bulat (male, born in 1978, Almaty), a banker born and raised in Almaty, shared a similar experience of reevaluating his identity through interactions with new migrants:

> When I talk to people of the same generation who have come from Russia, I realize how much we Tatars raised in the Soviet Union were influenced by Soviet values. I never thought about ethnic pride. I thought that was normal. But they are desperately trying to cherish their ethnic identity. I also feel the need to face my roots for the first time. In a sense, I'm relearning 'being Tatar' from the newcomers. (interviewed on 12 September 2023)

These narratives illustrate how encounters between established diaspora members and new migrants can catalyze processes of cultural revitalization and identity renegotiation. It aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the relational nature of diasporic identity formation (Quayson and Daswani, 2013), showing how notions of what it means to be Tatar are actively reshaped through interactions across different migrant cohorts.

The experiences shared by participants in these sections vividly illustrate the complex processes of identity negotiation and memory work occurring within the Tatar diaspora in the wake of the Ukraine conflict. They demonstrate how diasporic consciousness is continually reshaped through the intersection of geopolitical events, collective memory practices, and everyday encounters, supporting the theoretical framework of diaspora as an ongoing process of identity reconstruction rather than a fixed state of belonging.

Discussion

Reimagining diaspora in times of crisis

The narratives of recent Tatar migrants and established diaspora members challenge traditional conceptions of diaspora as fixed communities defined by a collective myth of homeland and

desire for return (Safran, 1991). Instead, they support more fluid, processual understandings of diaspora as a mode of consciousness characterized by multi-locality and the negotiation of multiple frames of belonging.

The experiences of Tatar migrants navigating complex identifications across Russian, Tatar, and Kazakhstani cultural contexts exemplify what Quayson and Daswani (2013) describe as the production of diaspora through negotiations across multiple temporal and spatial frames. The study reveals how geopolitical crises like the Ukraine conflict can serve as catalysts for reimagining diasporic identities, destabilizing taken-for-granted notions of home and belonging.

This reimagining process is particularly evident in the narratives of younger Tatar migrants who, in contrast to older generations, emphasize ethnic Tatar identity more strongly. This generational divide in approaches to identity and belonging illustrates the complex interplay between collective memories, historical narratives, and contemporary experiences in shaping diasporic consciousness.

Crisis-activated diaspora consciousness

Building on these observations, we propose the concept of "Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness" to describe the intensified processes of identity negotiation and community formation that occur within diaspora populations in response to acute geopolitical events. This concept extends Sökefeld's (2006) and Goździak and Main's (2020) work on critical events in diaspora mobilization by emphasizing how crises can catalyze not just political action, but profound shifts in self-understanding and group identification. Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness is characterized by:

- Rapid mobilization of collective memories and historical narratives to make sense of current events.
- Intensified engagement with cultural practices and language as markers of identity.
- Accelerated formation of new community networks, often facilitated by digital technologies.
- Heightened awareness of multiple, sometimes conflicting, frames of belonging.
- Reevaluation of relationships to both homeland and host society.

The experiences of Tatar migrants and diaspora members in this study exemplify these characteristics. For instance, the rapid mobilization of historical narratives about Tatar-Kazakh relations to frame contemporary solidarity, and the intensified engagement with Tatar language and cultural practices among both recent migrants and established diaspora members, demonstrate how crisis can activate latent aspects of diasporic identity.

This concept contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of diaspora in an era of intensified global mobility and digital interconnection. It highlights how geopolitical crises can serve as generative moments for reimagining diaspora, creating openings for new articulations of identity that draw on diverse historical narratives and cultural resources.

Digital technologies and transnational connections

The study's findings regarding the role of digital technologies in shaping Tatar migrant experiences align with recent scholarship on digital diasporas (Diminescu, 2008; Alinejad, 2019). The use of social media platforms, messaging apps, and online forums to facilitate rapid information exchange, maintain connections with the homeland, and forge new ties in Kazakhstan exemplifies what we might term "crisis-activated digital diaspora."

These digital practices demonstrate how new technologies enable the simultaneous maintenance of multiple belongings characteristic of contemporary diasporic experiences. They also highlight the potential for digital platforms to accelerate processes of community formation

and cultural revitalization in times of crisis, supporting the concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness.

However, the study also reveals potential limitations and challenges associated with digital diasporic practices. The rapid circulation of information and emotions through digital channels during crises can intensify feelings of displacement and anxiety, as well as potentially reinforcing echo chambers within diaspora communities. Future research could further explore the complex interplay between digital connectivity and diaspora formation in crisis contexts.

Memory work and diaspora formation

The study's findings contribute to ongoing debates about the role of memory in diaspora formation and maintenance. The mobilization of collective memories of past Tatar migrations to frame responses to current migrants aligns with Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory, demonstrating how memories of different historical periods are brought into dialogue to make sense of the present.

Moreover, the intergenerational transmission and reinterpretation of memories observed in this study exemplify what Hirsch (2012) terms "postmemory." The ways in which younger generations of Tatars engage with and reimagine historical narratives of migration and displacement highlight the dynamic, contested nature of diasporic memory.

The concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness extends these ideas by emphasizing how geopolitical crises can intensify processes of memory work within diaspora communities. The study reveals how the Ukraine conflict has prompted a reexamination of Tatar diaspora history in Kazakhstan, with both recent migrants and established diaspora members actively reinterpreting historical narratives in light of current events.

Implications for diaspora studies and migration policy

The findings of this study have several important implications for both diaspora studies and migration policy. Firstly, they underscore the need for more dynamic, process-oriented approaches to understanding diaspora formation and maintenance. The concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness offers a framework for examining how acute geopolitical events can reshape diasporic identities and communities in real-time.

Secondly, the study highlights the importance of considering multiple temporal and spatial frames when analyzing diaspora experiences. The complex negotiations of identity observed among Tatar migrants and diaspora members, spanning Russian, Tatar, Soviet, and Kazakhstani contexts, demonstrate the limitations of approaches that focus solely on binary homeland-host country dynamics.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need for more nuanced approaches to supporting diaspora communities during times of geopolitical crisis. Recognizing the complex, multi-layered nature of diasporic identities and the potential for crises to activate latent aspects of these identities could inform more effective strategies for migrant integration and community support.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of diaspora formation in times of crisis, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a single ethnic group (Tatars) in a specific geopolitical context (post-Soviet space) may limit the generalizability of findings to other diasporic communities. Future research could explore the applicability of the Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness concept to diverse diaspora groups in various global contexts.

Additionally, the relatively short time frame of the study limits our ability to assess the long-term impacts of crisis-activated diaspora processes. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of diasporic identities and community structures over extended periods following geopolitical crises would provide valuable insights into the durability of crisis-activated changes.

Future research could also delve deeper into the role of digital technologies in shaping crisis-activated diaspora experiences, perhaps employing digital ethnographic methods to capture online interactions and community formation processes in real-time.

In conclusion, this study contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about the nature of diaspora and diasporic memory in an era of intensified global mobility and geopolitical instability. By introducing the concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness and providing rich empirical insights into the experiences of Tatar migrants and diaspora communities navigating the fallout of the Ukraine conflict, it opens up new avenues for understanding the complex, multi-layered processes through which diasporic identities are negotiated and reimagined in response to global events.

Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Tatar migration from Russia to Kazakhstan and the subsequent transformations in diaspora identity and consciousness. Through an ethnographic exploration of narratives from recent Tatar migrants and established diaspora members, the research has revealed the complex processes of identity negotiation and memory work occurring within the Tatar diaspora in the wake of geopolitical crisis.

The study introduced the concept of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness to describe the intensified processes of identity negotiation and community formation catalyzed by acute geopolitical events. This concept highlights how crises can prompt rapid mobilization of collective memories, intensified engagement with cultural practices, accelerated formation of new community networks, and reevaluation of relationships to both homeland and host society.

Key findings include the complex navigation of multiple frames of belonging among Tatar migrants, generational variations in approaches to identity, the crucial role of digital technologies in shaping diaspora experiences, and the active reinterpretation of diaspora history in light of current events. These insights contribute to ongoing theoretical debates about the nature of diaspora and diasporic memory in an era of global mobility and geopolitical instability.

The study underscores the need for more dynamic, process-oriented approaches to understanding diaspora formation and maintenance. It highlights the importance of considering multiple temporal and spatial frames when analyzing diaspora experiences and suggests the need for more nuanced policy approaches to supporting diaspora communities during times of crisis.

While limited by its focus on a single ethnic group in a specific geopolitical context, this research opens up new avenues for understanding the complex processes through which diasporic identities are negotiated and reimagined in response to global events. Future research could explore the applicability of Crisis-Activated Diaspora Consciousness to diverse diaspora groups and employ longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term impacts of crisis-activated diaspora processes.

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