USA TODAY WEEKEND EXTRA
FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 2023 | SECTION D

Russians escaping war find a new home –

Chateau Chapiteau in Kveda Pona, Georgia, is home for Russian expats who don't want to serve in President Vladimir Putin's war. Whimsy and resourcefulness, such as an old bed frame being used as a swing, dot the grounds. PROVIDED BY CHATEAU CHAPITEAU; KIM HJELMGAARD/USA TODAY

and a moral dilemma

As they seek a life in neighboring countries, they ponder their own responsibility for Putin's war

Kim Hjelmgaard USA TODAY

KVEDA PONA, Georgia – It's a magical, rustic kingdom where an enchanted fairy-tale forest opens up to reveal waterfalls and mountain lakes; where a bubbling brook flows softly underneath dappled light as farm animals graze freely around your feet; where the vibe is creative-whimsical-cum-merry; where eco-warriors, artists and coders can learn new skills and debate the merits of democracy and solitude while baking artisanal bread.

And where even rank-and-file Russian passport holders can temporarily feel free from the pressure of the government fighting in their name in Ukraine – as well as from all those who say they are not doing enough to stop it.

At least, that's the sales pitch for Chateau Chapiteau.

"When people come here they feel it's a place that is out of context, a bubble, it exists on its own, you can get lost," said Vanya Mitin, the 38-year-old Moscow-born entrepreneur who founded the commune 90 miles northeast of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, a small but tough former Soviet republic located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia.

Chateau Chapiteau opened three years ago. It caters to seekers, wanderers and political, social and cultural exiles of various stripes. Now, nearly a year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this forest close to where Georgia meets the Russian republics of Chechnya and Dagestan has become another kind of haven: one for Russians who have fled their own country because they don't agree with the war in Ukraine and don't want to fight in it.

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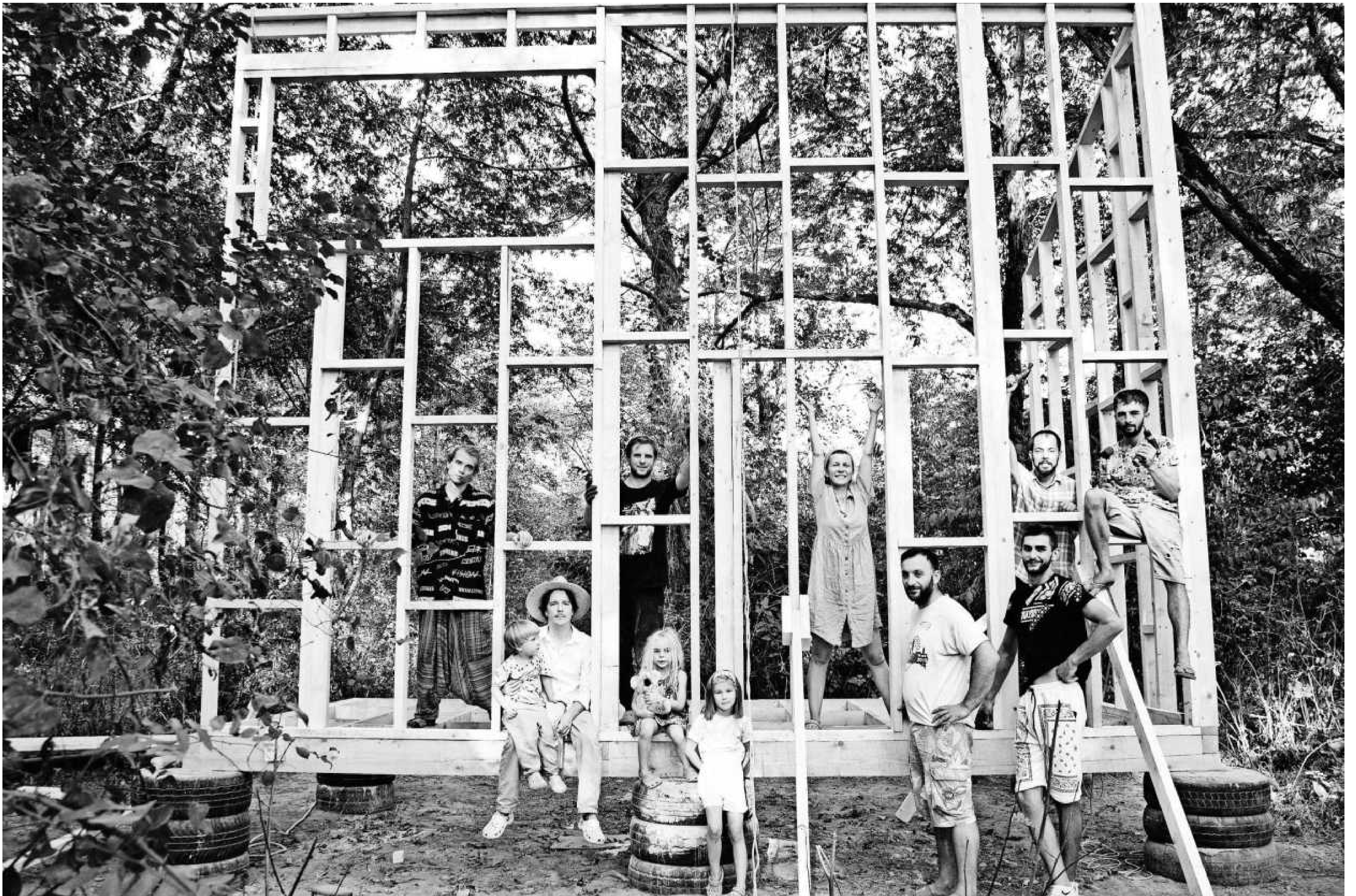
Working the fields at Chateau Chapiteau, which caters to wanderers, seekers and exiles of all stripes. PROVIDED BY CHATEAU CHAPITEAU



"If our people are dying because of the Russian state, shouldn't the Russian people also be ready to stand up (and resist) even if there is a danger to their lives? They are all to blame for what's happening now."

Valeriya Boyko, 25, a displaced Ukrainian from the eastern Donetsk region

Russians

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"It is not that we are ignoring the war," insisted Mitin, whose serious demeanor belies a dryness and archness of humor in his approach to business that often is wacky. One of his previous ventures in Russia that also had a branch in England was a series of cafes that charged customers only for the amount of time they spent on the premises. Even when Mitin is smiling, there is a little bit of a shrug to it that colors his apparent happiness.

"Most of the people with Russian backgrounds here, they were activists, or still are. They went to protests. There is nobody here, for example, who supported Putin even before the war," he said.

Since the earliest days of the invasion directed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainians made little secret of the moral weight they placed on the Russian people. If Putin's war was wrong, then his people had an obligation to rebel, rise up, agitate, protest, despite the Russian promise of crackdown on dissent. And in Russian protests, some did.

But far more have cast their lots another way, by leaving Russia entirely, especially once the threat of civilian mobilization meant ordinary Russians were likely to be drafted into the war if they remained at home.

So they have left by the thousands, especially for neighboring countries where Russians have visa-free access.

Putin's sway over the hearts and minds of Russians remains a pivotal question for the future of the war. Even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy alluded to it during an appearance before the U.S. Congress on Dec. 22. "The Russians will stand a chance to be free," Zelenskyy said, "only when they defeat the Kremlin in their minds."

Across Georgia today, untold thousands of Russians grapple in their own ways with the questions posed by the war. How much responsibility do they share for the decisions of Putin, for the suffering of Ukrainians? And what, if anything, should they do about it?

Expatriate Russians ask themselves these questions – or avoid asking them – in housewarming parties in Tbilisi, in cafes and bars, art shops and bookstore basements. And even amid the pools and vines of a forest at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains.

The retreat at Kveda Pona sprawls over about 30 acres.

It sits on farmlands in a scenic plain that faces the barrier range of snow-capped peaks and picturesque villages. This mountain range runs from the Black Sea in the west to the Caspian Sea in the east, putting up a geologic fence line that makes uneasy neighbors of Georgia to the south and the Russian Federation to the north. The border stretches for about 550 miles.

TOP: Vanya Mitin, center with a child on his lap, and others sit on the structure of a house under construction on the grounds of Chateau Chapiteau. PROVIDED BY CHATEAU CHAPITEAU

ABOVE: Mitin's retreat in Kveda Pona, Georgia, covers about 30 acres. KIM HJELMGAARD/USA TODAY

There's an orchard, a farm, a large studio building, smaller workshops, wooden cabins, a communal kitchen and entertainment room with a cozy fireplace, a bar in the woods, a collapsible ping-pong table and a makeshift swing over a stream made out of an old iron bed frame. Some other parts of Chateau Chapiteau, such as traditional Georgian houses, are still under construction.

Wandering the grounds one day as autumn gathered last month, in no particular order, was a confusing mixture of employees, volunteers, paying guests, friends, hangers-on, ex-wives, ex-husbands, two small children rolling around in the mud, one teenage Georgian kitchen worker from the nearby village, two recently arrived Germans, a Russian-speaking American from Colorado who said she had just got here from Turkey where she saw scores of exiled Russians "behaving like they were on a beach vacation," several boisterous dogs, three cats and at least two chickens, one of whom is called "City." It was exceptionally hard to get a sense of how many people really lived there. At least 20. Perhaps as many as 50.

Around midday, there was a brief commotion as an all-hands buffet-style lunch of buckwheat (vegetarian and vegan options), chopped beet root, soup, bread and various salads was served in a main building on the estate. Halfway through the meal, Mitin abruptly stood up and walked over to an electric piano and started accompanying one of the instrument's preprogrammed songs. It sounded like an upbeat video game tune. When he tired of that, he briefly left the room and came back with a guitar, which he started quietly fingerpicking and eventually graduated to some light strumming. He said nothing.

Daniil Mulyard, Mitin's half-brother, leaned in semi-conspiratorially from across the table.

"You know," he said, "even when the war first started, the protests in Russia were not very big. A couple of thousand people in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other big cities. People were afraid. And actually I think that most of the people who went to those protests have now left Russia."

Mulyard, 28, is in a pretty good position to know.

At Chateau Chapiteau, he cares for the organic cucumbers and other produce grown on site. But he also works for OVD-Info, a Moscow-based independent human rights group that focuses on political persecution in Russia. OVD-Info tracks arrests of protesters, monitors censorship and helps with legal aid. According to OVD-Info data, about 20,000 protesters have been detained in Russia for various periods of time since Feb. 24, the start of the war.

"In my experience, it's usually the same circles of people" who go to the protests, Mulyard said. "It's seldom people from different circles. There's really nobody left to protest."

A 'new language': What is a Russian's responsibility?

Every Sunday, a 23-year-old Muscovite with tousled hair, a broad, flat forehead and advanced skills in logical deduction named Arseny Velikanov sits at the head of a plastic garden dining table, in the basement of a bookstore, in a country Russia has fought several wars

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"They escape to Georgia and the European Union and pretend to be Ukrainians there. ... We expect Russians to persuade their own men – their fathers and sons in the military – to leave the territory of Ukraine."

Anastasiya Orlova, 28, a Ukrainian who works for a Kyiv-based humanitarian organization

TOP: Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, is one of the places where Russians have sought a haven since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. PEARLY JACOB FOR USA TODAY

ABOVE: Anti-Russian graffiti is scrawled on a wall in Tbilisi. KIM HJELMGAARD/ USA TODAY

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with, and tries to conjure what he calls a "new language."

This language is full of contradictions, history, abstract concepts, moral quandaries, emotional pitfalls, anger, tension. It is riddled with guilt, shame, fear, confusion. Its would-be speakers – including himself – are a little spoiled, Velikanov believes. Cowards, others say.

"I was about a year old when Putin became Russia's president," Velikanov said one evening in mid-November in Tbilisi, a chaotic, ancient city that is increasingly filled with Russians wearing denim, patterned shirts, vintage dresses, structured coats and beanie hats.

Tbilsi is a former Silk Road capital, a bohemian place where speakeasy culture unfussily sits alongside vintage flea markets and towering Orthodox churches. It is also a haven for food and wine lovers. Archaeologists have pinpointed the world's earliest known vintners, circa 6,000 B.C., to Georgia. Wine is the nation's second-largest export after ferroalloys.

There are no precise totals for how many Russians have left the country since February. But estimates based on media reports and figures released from neighboring countries where Russians have visa-free access, such as Georgia and Kazakhstan, indicate it runs into the hundreds of thousands, perhaps even as high as 700,000.

This exodus is the smaller one in the wider region: The United Nations estimates 7.8 million Ukrainian refugees have been forced to flee their homes and seek safety, protection and humanitarian assistance as Russia's military has destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure and appeared to deliberately target civilians. Humanitarian organizations have warned a new wave of Ukrainian refugees may be coming this winter as Russian missile attacks deprive millions of access to electricity, heat and water.

Velikanov had just finished one of his weekly talks at the bookstore for about a dozen people, all of them Russian. Upstairs, the bookshelves were filled with Russian-language graphic novels, thrillers and reference titles. In one corner of the store, a few kids played board games as their Russian parents exchanged news, gossip and worry with friends about home. A small bar serving coffee, beer and sandwiches was tended by a tattooed Russian who volunteered that back in Moscow, before the war, he used to work in a sex shop.

"I am always asking myself: Have I done enough? How much am I to blame? This is what we are trying to understand in our discussions. This is the 'language' we are trying to construct," said Velikanov, a philosophy major in college. He fled to Georgia from Russia's largest city in March to avoid being forced to fight in Ukraine.

It's a question even experts struggle to answer.

"What is the ethical framework around citizen responsibility in wartime?" said David DeCrosse, a professor of ethics at Santa Clara University. "You may get drafted. But should you go if you don't believe in the war? Maybe citizens in wartime have no other responsibility other than to do what the state asks them to do? Maybe there is an obligation to be part of the opposition to a profoundly unjust war?"

Yet political dissent in Russia – which had never been a safe pursuit – has been all but obliterated.

Anti-war protests are punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Any Russian who dares speak publicly against the war in Ukraine faces an uncertain future.

"My lawyers told me that I would be arrested," Yevgenia Albats, a longtime Putin critic who fled the country in August by crossing into Estonia on foot, said recently in an interview with Puck, a newsletter. "Basically, we now live in a country where there are no longer any rules."

Still, there are some Russians who believe it is not their responsibility to be held accountable for actions taken by their government, even if their government is murdering civilians.

Dmitry Diachenko is one of them.

The 24-year-old used to work in a manufacturing plant in St. Petersburg before arriving in Tbilisi in March. Diachenko left Russia because he saw it becoming an international outcast and felt it would be easer to pursue his ambition to work in the technology industry if he were overseas. He's saving money to travel to Thailand and is leaning toward trying to emigrate to Canada, a country he has never visited but suspects may have a similar climate to Russia's.

"I want to be clear: I don't support Putin's war. But I also don't feel any particular reason to try to stop it," he said. "I don't have any allegiance to anyone or anything apart from myself."

Diachenko said that since coming to Georgia, his main preoccupation has been learning to play the piano. He showed off some clips of his playing posted on his Instagram account, a social media platform that Russia's communications regulator has banned for its "extremism." He is now teaching himself the songs of British music artist Elton John.

Yet others, such as Velikanov, have been reappraising their obligations as Russian citizens.

"In Moscow, people like me, we had a comfortable, normal life. When we heard the propaganda from the government we smiled at it like someone who smiles at a fool," he said. "OK, maybe we knew that something terrible was happening in Crimea, in Donbas, or in Abkhazia, but we thought 'Well, that is of course not at all about us.'"

Velikanov's group had recently been spending time reading and talking about seminal texts written by Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt and other notable postwar philosophers and political theorists who examined the personal and shared responsibility of average citizens in the context of the atrocities carried out by Germans in World War II.

"Can I blame Ukrainians for hating us all right now?" Velikanov asked. "Of course not. They have that total right. Do I feel moral guilt? Yes. Did I break any laws or do a criminal thing by leaving Russia? No. Do I experience political guilt for letting this happen and not doing more? Yes. But this type of guilt is also not a crime."

Velikanov paused. He fidgeted in his chair. He was uncertain how to proceed. He has spoken to few Ukrainians about these questions. It's a delicate topic.

"I guess what I can say is that Ukrainians have a right to not care about anything I say or do, and what am I supposed to do in that situation? I guess I can only offer my silence."

A complicated friendship for Georgians, Russians

"Russians, some Belarusians, but mostly Russians," said Igor Kyznetsov.

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"If (Ukraine) loses this war, the next one will be in Georgia. I'm absolutely sure. ... Even now Georgia isn't secure and is not in a safe position."

David Katsarava, 45, a Georgian volunteer fighting in Ukraine

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The 36-year-old Russian proprietor of Freedom Aroma, a Tbilisi bar and cafe, was explaining who on any given day makes up the majority of his customers. His Russian and Belarusian employees alternated between listening in and steaming milk with an espresso machine.

Kyznetsov opened his bar in August, one month before Putin announced a massive troop mobilization after Russia suffered a series of major setbacks on Ukrainian battlefields.

Business has been "very good," he said.

Some Russians may prefer to soak up sun on Spanish beaches, party in French nightclubs and selfie from Italian piazzas and ski hubs. As the war has dragged on, that has become harder for them as European countries have restricted access to their territories.

In Georgia, Russians can live and work for up to a year without a visa.

This, along with geographical proximity, partly explains why an estimated 300,000 Russians – nearly 10% of Georgia's 3.7 million population – have decamped to the country in recent years.

The influx since the start of the Ukraine war has simply supplemented a Russian presence that was already easy to discern.

There are dozens of bars, cafes and restaurants in Tbilisi where Russian is the only language that can be heard spoken above the clang of silverware. Nightclubs where the young, fashion-forward ravers overwhelmingly hail from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Over several visits in mid-November, Russians (and a few Belarusians) exclusively inhabited the bookstore where Velikanov held his weekly talks for Russians on devising a "new language" to talk about Ukraine. The bookstore is sandwiched between two cafes, both Russian-run. The patrons of both cafes overwhelmingly come from one place: Russia.

Georgians complain the influx has aggravated a growing housing shortage, supercharged an increase in rents, jammed up commuter traffic routes and generally led to a wave of Russian money that is helpful for short-terms economic gains but unhelpful as it increases Georgia's economic dependence on Russia.

Some Georgians, such as 30-year-old Nicholas Shevardnadze, a bar owner, don't trust them.

"All these Russians are walking around Tbilisi talking about how they were so stressed in Russia, how they were stuck, that they are 'refugees.' For me, their emotions are fake. I understand they are scared. But c'mon man, it's your country!" he said of their decision to flee Russia rather than find ways, from inside, to undermine its authoritarian regime.

Shevardnadze's bar – House of Camora – is located at Fabrika, a Tbilisi cultural center that is a symbol of the shiny, new Georgia. Fabrika is an old Soviet sewing factory that has been given an industrial-design makeover. It has co-working spaces, a vinyl record shop, yoga studios, resident graffiti artists and multiple paces to grab a fancy burger or ramen noodles.

"The ship is going down and all the rats are running away," he said of the Russian exodus.

Shevardnadze's views reflect an animosity that runs deeper than just the current wave of Russians, in a country still struggling to untangle itself from the shadow of its former Soviet master.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, both Russia and Georgia were newly independent nations. But in the years that followed, Russia-backed separatists in Georgia sought to declare independence for two regions, which led to a war in 2008.

The war ended in days, with Russian troops occupying the regions. Today, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (or the Tskhinvali region, as Georgians prefer to call it) remain under Russian control.

The conflict essentially meant Russia had invaded the bordering portions of an independent country.

It announced Moscow's determination, Daniel Fried, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland has noted, "to force a country (it) regarded as within Russia's sphere of influence to heel."

Many international affairs specialists in the West such as Fried regard Russia's 2008 actions in Georgia as a kind of prelude to Ukraine. In 2014, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimea region on the Black Sea and backed separatists in Donbas, a vast eastern industrial heartlands area dotted with factories and coal plants.

In Georgia, as in Ukraine, while Russia seized its bordering regions, the rest of the country took steps to unite with the West.

It applied to be a member of the European Union economic bloc in March. Like Ukraine, it has aspirations to join NATO, the military alliance that backs Western allies against Russian aggression. (NATO's expansion to include former Soviet republics such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe such as Poland, Hungary and Romania, is sometimes cited as one of the reasons Putin decided this year to extend the war he started in Ukraine in 2014 to an all-out invasion.)

Many Georgians worry Russia could eventually try to take more territory, as it did in Ukraine.

Yet when it comes to Russia today, Georgia remains far from standoffish.

Paata Zakareishvili, a Georgian government minister for reconciliation and civic equality from 2012 to 2016 who now teaches political science at Grigol Robakidze University in Tbilisi, said that for all of Georgia's overtures to the West, the country's current government

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TOP: War began in Georgia in 2008 as Russia-backed separatists sought to declare independence for two regions of the country. SERGEY GRITS/AP

ABOVE: Georgian troops fire rockets at separatists in August 2008. Many see those Russian actions as a precursor to the war in Ukraine. VANO SHLAMOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“At first I thought, ‘Well, I don’t know what it’s like to live in a dictatorship. But now I have lost any hope of trying to understand what Russians are afraid of. ... Let them try to understand us first.”

Liliya, 27, a Ukrainian who works for an international development organization in Lviv, in western Ukraine

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led by President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili’s ruling Georgian Dream party has maintained good relations with Russia.

Georgia has kept its borders entirely open to Russian nationals.

And over the past 10 months, its economy has become more, not less, tethered to Russia’s. The country has increased its imports of Russian oil and energy products. The Georgia branch of Transparency International, a Berlin-based organization that measures global corruption, has raised concern that many of the 17,000 Russian companies registered in Georgia since the start of the war – a tenfold increase compared with year-earlier totals – could be helping Moscow evade the sanctions imposed on it by the U.S. and European countries.

Georgia has facilitated Kremlin-friendly information campaigns not so much by talking up Russia but by talking down the “lewd” West, Zakareishvili said. “Their main slogan can be summed up: ‘Yes, Russia is bad, but what’s good about the West? How did it ever help us?’ ”

Despite the presence of Ukrainian flags and anti-Russian graffiti across Tbilisi and other cities, many of Georgia’s leading politicians have adopted a carefully calibrated ambivalence toward Putin. No Georgian soldiers or weapons have been sent to Ukraine by the government. (Thousands of Georgian volunteers have been fighting in Ukraine. They make up one of the highest numbers in the international legions.) At least one former spy for Russia’s security services has come forward to claim he was sent to Georgia to keep tabs on the expanding number of Russian emigres.

“Our government right now doesn’t have policies about anything,” said Rati Khazalia, 27, a Georgian business owner who founded and runs Jpg, an artsy print shop, across the courtyard from Shevardnadze’s Camaro bar at Fabrika. “We don’t know in which direction the country is going. Is it to the West? Or is to the East?”

Khazalia said he has sympathy for some Russians in Georgia, though he worries about the impact on the cost of living. He fears a cohort that has shown itself resistant to learning the local language and chosen to socialize almost exclusively among its own kind will not, ultimately, be good for community relations. It also bothers him that the Russians he meets often view themselves as distinct from the regime they are fleeing. They appear to have little regard, he said, for how Georgians might feel threatened by a group of people who many like him have long seen as “imperialists,” and with whom they share a fraught history.

“Most of the Russians I encounter are against everything that is happening in Ukraine. I can see that,” he said. “They feel some responsibility for things that are taking place. I see they want it to change. But I also see them trying to separate themselves from the war because they think of themselves as liberals, more into art and music.”

Khazalia said he still vividly recalls the moment in 2008 when Russian jets bombed his village, destroying homes and causing a massive fire in the nearby woodlands.

Today, Russia’s tanks could be in Tbilisi in less than an hour.

Rejected in Russia; rejected in Georgia

Sergey and Polina don’t think of themselves as cowards.

They do think they are being squeezed from all sides.

The pair, who are in a romantic relationship, said they went to protest after protest in Moscow. They were on the streets after the war first broke out. They asked to be identified by only their first names, because of concerns over how Russia’s authorities might interpret their words and ultimately penalize them for it.

TOP: Nicholas Shevardnadze, a bar owner in Tbilisi, Georgia, says Russians should fight the regime from the inside rather than flee. PHOTOS BY PEARLY JACOB FOR USA TODAY

ABOVE: Rati Khazalia, a business owner in Tbilisi, recalls Russians bombing his village in 2008 when he was a child.

Paata Zakareishvili, a former Georgian government minister, says he is concerned about Russia’s influence in Georgia.

Over a dinner they prepared in their temporary rental apartment on the edge of Tbilisi, they described a scene then, and in previous protests they participated in, in which endless columns of riot police in full military tactical gear descended on them like a “closing vice.”

Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Placards confiscated. Shouted phrases drowned out.

Sergey fled to Georgia in May. Polina followed in September.

They have good jobs in digital marketing that allow them to work remotely. They are disgusted by the war and feel deep embarrassment over what they perceive as their inability to do anything practical to help stop it. Yet they don’t feel that they should have to stay in a country where openly communicating their beliefs leads to prison or beatings, likely both.

“I don’t know what Ukrainians want from us,” said Polina, 23. “If their expectation is that unless the prisons in Russia are full of protesters then we are not doing enough, I don’t think that’s fair. But I understand their anger. And I understand the only way for them to maybe survive this anger is to direct it at the thing – Russians – that has caused it.”

For Sergey, 24, there was another reason to flee.

He had served in Russia’s military as a reservist. He said he knew Russia’s military “culture” – the poor training, inconsistent discipline, the blatant disregard for civilians, the effective inducements to loot because of low pay and terrible conditions. All of this has been shockingly evident in Ukraine as war crimes allegations mount.

Sergey wanted no part of it.

But leaving has also been hard.

There are minor indignities to suffer, from pointed remarks from strangers aimed at Russians in the supermarket or on graffiti scrawled on walls in Tbilisi.

And there are indignities left behind. His uncle, a military man, calls him a coward for leaving Russia. Sergey’s father also thinks this of his son but is more guarded in how he phrases it. Only his mother supports his decision.

“My mother has told me not to talk to my father,” he said, a comment that drew a supportive glance and touch of the arm from Polina. She said they talk constantly about what they should do, where they should go, what kind of reception, as Russians, they might expect.

Still, while there are no easy answers, there are some moral expectations, according to Jeff McMahan, an American philosopher who teaches at Oxford University and has spent years thinking about the responsibilities of citizens in times of war.

He said every Russian, to a greater or lesser extent, has some duty to oppose an unjust war like the one in Ukraine, which was unprovoked. He said Russian civilians who are important to the functioning of the state, who are involved in the major social, economic and political institutions of the country, have the

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"Quite often my impression is Russians don't feel guilty about this war. They leave because they have a strong feeling of self-preservation and maybe they are panicking about the situation more than they should."

Daniil Mulyard, 28, a Russian who works for an independent human rights group that focuses on political persecution in Russia

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greatest responsibility to make clear their opposition to the war because they have more influence over Putin and other people in the Kremlin.

But he said Russians like Sergey and Polina are also "morally liable to suffer certain harms that might be imposed on them in external efforts to bring the war to an end."

These "harms" could be in the form of sanctions intended to produce discontent in society, as a means of putting pressure on Putin, that ultimately impact their living standards, ability to work, travel freely and leave them feeling ostracized – from Ukrainians or anyone else.

"These sanctions don't hurt Russian civilians in anything like the ways in which Russia is harming and hurting civilians in Ukraine," McMahan said. "These are proportionate harms. These people are not entirely innocent because they have some responsibility to try to prevent their government from doing what their government is doing."

Yet when Albats, the Putin critic who fled Russia by crossing into Estonia this past summer, looks around at her compatriots, she sees little reason to be optimistic.

Albats, 64, is now based in the U.S.

In her interview with Puck, she described Russia's younger generations as "completely spoiled." She said that they lacked "experience of the Soviet struggle" and that after the last major pro-democracy protests in Russia in 2011-2012, the biggest of the Putin era, they had been placated, Muscovites especially, "with the best restaurants and bike lanes and sidewalks and new theaters and overhauled, modernized museums and libraries, and here's work and you can do whatever you want. You shouldn't criticize Putin, of course, but anything else, go for it." Albats said in email that there are now virtually no avenues for Russians to pursue meaningful dissent inside the country, and any Russians who protest once they leave, and there haven't been many, do so only for "self-satisfaction."

"People in Iran are braving bullets to protest for women's rights. People in China are on the streets calling for freedom. The only recent protests I have seen in Russia is by people who complain they haven't been given sufficiently good weapons and equipment to go kill Ukrainians," Yaroslav Trofimov, a Ukrainian-born journalist for The Wall Street Journal, tweeted recently, summing up the feelings of many Ukrainians toward Russians.

TOP: Vanya Mitin of Chateau Chapiteau stands amid an art installation he had set up at the commune. The "forest of hands" aims to show Russians are tacitly approving atrocities that authorities are committing, he says.
PEARLY JACOB FOR USA TODAY

ABOVE: Yevgenia Albats is a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2018, a Moscow court fined her magazine $335,000, which was seen as retribution for its reporting. She fled Russia last year.
PAVEL GOLOVKIN/AP

A recent leaked poll by the Kremlin found that Russia support for the war that has devastated the nation's economy and military is falling, according to the Latvia-based investigations outlet Meduza, which obtained the information.

But it still remains high.

David Cortright, a retired peace studies professor and former soldier who ended up protesting the Vietnam War while on active duty, said that the idea that Russians should be doing more than they are to overturn Putin's government is a "false expectation."

He said that "even if Russians are not going to go out and protest – if Russians are leaving the country and refusing to fight – it means morale in the country is low. It means public opinion in Russia is shifting. It means (Ukraine is) winning."

Back in the sun-dappled forest of Chateau Chapiteau, where an amorphous group of Russian expats hopes to build a sort of agrarian utopia, entrepreneur Mitin gave a tour of an art installation that he had set up in the woods.

It's called the "forest of hands." It features 24 sculpted, raised hands – the number marking the war's start on the 24th day of February – placed in a circle in the ground. The title is a reference to a famous saying of educators in Soviet times.

"It is the dream of a totalitarian teacher to see people obey, blindly obey," Mitin said, adding that Soviet teachers would often use the phrase "I see a forest of hands" to cajole students into raising their hands to questions they may not be able to answer. They sought full participation even if it was without understanding. He said the installation was intended to show Russians are tacitly approving atrocities committed by the authorities.

"I can't imagine how to be useful in Russia if you're not ready to sacrifice your life or go to prison," he said. Mitin pointed out that Chateau Chapiteau has raised money for displaced Ukrainians and funded a Ukrainian family's ongoing stay at the retreat. He also noted that nationals of many countries come to the commune, not just Russians.

Mitin said he had recently acquired Israeli citizenship and wants to sever all ties to the country where he was born and raised. "Maybe sometimes to kill an evil you should just leave it alone. Let it destroy itself from within. ... Maybe it's better to leave this hooligan (Putin) alone. ... maybe everyone should just leave (Russia)."

Mulyard, his half-brother, though, has the opposite idea.

He has been out of Russia since March. Over the objections of Mitin, his girlfriend and many of the other Russians ensconced at Chateau Chapiteau, Mulyard said he's considering returning home so he can be more directly useful.

"I don't really agree with those people, with a lot of the Russians who have left, that just by being there you will immediately go to prison and die," he said. "That doesn't really happen unless you are involved in activism. Quite often my impression is Russians don't feel guilty about this war. They leave because they have a strong feeling of self-preservation and maybe they are panicking about the situation more than they should."

Contributing: Masho Lomashvili, Iryna Dobrohorska