International Migration

IOM UN MIGRATION

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

A Privilege That Can Be Withdrawn: Regulation of Exit in Russia and Other Post-Soviet Republics

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Received: 20 August 2024 | **Revised:** 21 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 24 October 2025

Keywords: authoritarian regimes | exit restrictions | freedom of movement | post-Soviet | Russia

ABSTRACT

The former Soviet Union's restrictions on citizens' foreign travel or emigration were notoriously draconian. Yet what replaced them in the fifteen independent states of the post-Soviet region has not been well analysed. Outside the Baltic republics, the monolithic and prohibitive policies of the Soviet past have given way to a patchwork of restrictions with more complex motivations reflecting the diversity of contemporary Eurasian states. However, while many more people in the region can travel abroad when they wish, exit remains a privilege, rather than an enforceable right. Post-Soviet states' exit policies increasingly resemble those in other primarily authoritarian contexts around the world, albeit somewhat marked by Eurasian regimes' high levels of both coercive capacity and informality and the weakness of labour and the left. We conclude that the USSR's fixation on preventing exit was historically exceptional as a policy on foreign travel, rather than paradigmatic, and severely limited the regime's own migration policy options. In a paradox, the relaxation of blanket prohibitions has only increased the post-Soviet state's freedom to tailor restrictions on exit to its interests far more effectively than the USSR ever could.

1 | Introduction: Revisiting a Cold War Problem in a Changed World

The USSR severely limited its citizens' departure abroad. In the Cold War, following Winston Churchill's 1946 speech in Fulton, Missouri, coining the term "Iron Curtain," these Soviet policies came to represent the paradigmatic case of repressive exit restrictions. Indeed, for Western citizens, academic Sovietologists, and politicians alike, the Kremlin's refusal to allow people to leave demonstrated the essential cruelty of the Soviet system. Today, although people in most Eurasian[1] countries find opportunities to go abroad far more widespread than in Soviet times, exit remains an unreliable privilege rather than a reliable right. In the spirit of "autocratic functionalism" (Chan 2023), the exit privilege in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes results from an informal agreement of interest groups within the ruling elite, subject to reconsideration if elite interests change, rather than institutionalised norms of individual freedom. The nature of regulation has changed as well, from sweeping bureaucratic prohibition to a patchwork of formal and informal regulation. Soviet policies reflected an extreme fixation on suppressing exit, seen as a prerequisite for the regime's survival. Today, in contrast, the region has become more typical of authoritarian regimes elsewhere, in which governments shun blanket, ideologically motivated repression for a tailored incentive structure meant to neutralise opposition and promote pragmatic regime interests. Picking up where Cold War studies left off, with the Soviet Union's dissolution, we analyse the evolving control of exit in the three and a half decades of post-Soviet history.

The diversity of exit policy in Eurasia reflects the diversity of the region's regimes. Along with the largest state, Russia, we also examine the more draconian policies of some Central Asian states, contrasting them with more permissive ones elsewhere in Eurasia. While the authorities display greater tolerance for travel abroad, this flexibility paradoxically permits them to

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implement more targeted restrictions, offering new opportunities for regimes and actors within them to profit from control over exit. Likewise, the mechanisms governing exit are also more nuanced than the Soviet Union's outright bureaucratic prohibition, often deploying indirect or informal controls. In this survey, we identify broad trends since the Soviet dissolution as well as patterns of variation among contemporary states; situate those differences within the contemporary international context and the post-Soviet political context; and suggest directions for future inquiries.

Soviet exit policies have not been well integrated into comparative scholarship, with a few exceptions, e.g., Miller and Peters (2018). While an extensive literature on international migration has emerged since the Cold War, the consequences of the exit of the post-Soviet transition have not been well analysed. For our review, we analyse published English-language and Russian-language sources as well as a few in other regional languages, assessing formal restrictions on exit in post-Soviet countries, as well as how citizens might experience less formalised barriers to foreign travel. We excluded the Baltic republics, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, both because their 1940 annexation by the USSR was not recognised by most foreign governments and because their successful democratisation and integration into the EU and NATO place them outside the region in political terms. We also excluded the unrecognised breakaway republics of Transdniestria, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, or the former Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" in Russian-occupied Ukraine (unlawfully annexed by Russia in 2022), whose policies exist in radically different legal and political contexts. In analysing the remaining twelve internationally recognised post-Soviet republics, both available evidence and inherent interest have led us to focus more on some countries or phenomena than on others, just as we have drawn evidence from different times since 1991, noting significant trends and evolution. Reports on human rights issues compiled by non-governmental organisations, the U.S. State Department, and the United Nations, as well as national legislation and media sources, often address exit restrictions. Given the paper's agenda-setting goals and survey structure, primary sources, such as expert interviews, have also been left for future studies.

Below, we review studies of Soviet exit policies, exit elsewhere in the contemporary world, and the post-Soviet political scene. We then survey the post-Soviet period and its exit policies. We consider restrictions on specific categories of individuals, whether officially acknowledged (debtors, security and military personnel) or unacknowledged (regime opponents), as well as informal or indirect restrictions; turn to the recent policy changes brought about in Russia and Ukraine by the former's 2022 full-scale invasion of the latter; and finally summarise the significance of our findings for international exit restrictions around the world.

2 | Soviet Exit Policies and Contemporary Context

Scholars during and after the Cold War have examined Soviet policies on exit, although typically without extensive comparative analysis (Chandler 1998; Lohr 2012; Matthews 1978, 1993). From the Bolshevik regime's rise to power in 1917, and until the mid-1920s, exit was relatively free, and regime opponents were encouraged to emigrate. Thereafter, travel abroad became a rare privilege, with each visit requiring a separate "exit visa" and passports issued on a one-time basis. In effect, denial of exit became the default policy, with permission the exception. The government also hardened the border itself, with special "border troops" supervised by the KGB secret police intensively patrolling boundaries (Artemiev and Burlutsky 1957). These policies did not emerge from Marxist-Leninist doctrine but responded to the Soviet government's own incentives as it built a socialist state in a capitalist world.[2] A recent study has suggested that the machinery of border closure was first created to interdict smuggling caused by Soviet collectivisation and state-led industrialisation, and only later adapted to suppress human mobility (Shlyakhter 2020). Light (2012) argues that Soviet exit limitations differed from those in other authoritarian regimes by their integration into all-encompassing controls over labour and personal development, meant to prevent Soviet workers from exercising their "exit option" by abandoning their employment in state-owned enterprises or collective farms, and to limit their access to information about the outside world. In related policies, urban and rural residents received differential residence rights, with the agricultural population requiring permission to leave the countryside, and even the urban population restricted from residing in Moscow and other highly desirable cities. Disfavoured ethnic groups such as Volga Germans and Roma were subjected to additional discriminatory limitations, and many border regions and cities with military production were further restricted.

These domestic and foreign travel controls worked in tandem, with the lack of an exit option frustrating resistance to internal migration controls. In addition, because the freedom to travel abroad tends to strengthen economic, cultural, and social links (Delcour and Fernandes 2016), the Soviet government considered it a threat to political stability (Light 2016, 21). Soviet prohibitions on emigration were highly embarrassing to the regime and thus were implemented through unpublished ministerial instructions. Nonetheless, their existence was glaringly obvious, leading to denunciations by Cold Warriors from Winston Churchill to Ronald Reagan, as well as from international civil society (Human Rights Watch 1993). Exceptions were made for ethnic groups with sponsors in the West who negotiated their collective departure, such as Soviet Jews and ethnic Germans; or, after the long-ruling autocrat Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, for internationally known dissidents, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Vladimir Bukovskiy. From the 1960s onward, the Soviet government also permitted some group tourism abroad, primarily to other Warsaw Pact countries, although such tour groups required KGB vetting and were closely monitored to prevent flight or unauthorised contact with foreigners (Gorsuch 2011, 82). Exit restrictions were first openly denounced under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) policy in the mid-1980s. The prohibition on unauthorised exit was finally cancelled on May 20, 1991, months before the collapse of the Soviet Union that December. Within a few years, Russia and many other post-Soviet states adopted new constitutions and legislation explicitly entrenching a legal right to leave the country with a clarity not matched in some Western states (Appendix A).

Cold War Sovietologists generally did not compare Soviet exit restrictions with those elsewhere, even the Soviet Union's

Eastern European satellites, whose policies were influenced by the USSR but also differed sharply among themselves. For example, communist Poland began easing restrictions in the 1950s and established generalised freedom of exit by 1980 (Brunarska 2025; Stola 2015). Moreover, evolution in Eurasian states' exit policies since 1991 has not been systematically analysed. Studies of post-Soviet migration (Schenk 2018; Urinboyev 2020) generally examine Russia as the *destination* for post-Soviet labour migrants. The presumed end of exit restrictions in Russia after 1991 figures as the premise for post-Soviet migration policies (e.g., Light 2016), rather than meriting investigation in its own right.

The study of exit policies has advanced since the Cold War, including a special issue of this journal, yielding insights salient to Eurasia. First, sweeping, ideological bans on exit are fading around the world. While some categories such as highly skilled workers and military personnel remain subject to heightened restrictions, Pedroza and Palop-Garcia's cross-national study (2025) found contemporary states "embrace[] the idea of the right to emigration as a basic human right: no country in our study bans emigration." This permissive trend extends even to remaining communist countries. Thus, in the People's Republic of China, initially harsh policies were liberalised after 1980. Today, while regime critics, criminal suspects, debtors, public servants, and civil litigants face restrictions, most citizens, most of the time may now leave the People's Republic (Song 2025). Likewise, since the 1990s famine, communist North Korea has first tacitly and then formally permitted temporary labour migration to China, even as defection to South Korea remains strictly prohibited (Yi and Bahk 2025). Indeed, in Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the North Korean government resumed organised temporary labour migration of North Korean workers to Russia (Mackenzie 2025). Likewise, despite draconian restrictions on paper, Eritrea tolerates illicit exit in practice, although émigrés who wish to return or facilitate the departure of family members must pay an annual tax (Milena and Cole 2025), mirroring Tsourapas's (2020) findings of Morocco's extensive surveillance of its citizens working in France. These regimes increasingly coordinate the management of exit and émigré communities.

Studies also note the prevalence of differentiated controls regulating who may leave and to where. For example, India restricts exit for work in the Gulf states by women with young children (Joseph et al. 2025). In contrast to the Soviet Union, where exit was a privilege for the trusted elite, some Latin American regimes, such as Venezuela under Maduro, restrict exit by elites far more than exit by ordinary people (Larratt-Smith and Leon 2025). Post-Soviet Georgia awards international scholarships to trusted students likely to return after their studies (Krannich and Hunger 2025). Some governments, including post-Soviet ones, prevent their own citizens from leaving at the behest of foreign governments, or prevent foreign citizens from travelling onward at the behest of their government (Macklin 2025; Turaeva 2025). While the most restrictive policies are associated with authoritarian regimes, democratic India's restrictions on mothers' labour migration have been noted. Taiwan, a de facto state, governs exit more closely than most other democracies, fearing subversion by the People's Republic of China (Fan 2025). How do post-Soviet exit policies fit into these broader trends?

While some post-Soviet states are "closed authoritarian regimes" in which no opposition or critical civil society exists, others exist in what (Carothers 2002, 9) refers to as the "political grey zone," where regimes mimic some aspects of democracy (perhaps holding elections). Diamond (2002) terms these "hybrid" or "electoral authoritarian" regimes. Likewise, the organisation Freedom House annually assesses states' level of political freedom. In its 2023 rankings, apart from the Baltics, only Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia were classified as "partially free." All other states in the region were categorised as "not free" (Freedom House 2023). Russia and most of its neighbours are autocratic regimes with presidents who govern through strong military, police, and intelligence services (Taylor 2011). At the same time, these governments differ from their Soviet predecessors in important ways.

First, while contemporary Eurasian states feature strong coercive institutions, political decisions typically reflect informal understandings among elites around the ruler, providing flexibility in administering policies (Ledeneva 2006, 2013; Mendras 2012). The resulting system exhibits not only "autocratic functionalism," discussed below, but also "authoritarian flexibility" (Khmelnitskaya et al. 2023; Schwenck 2023). Second, following a global authoritarian trend, Eurasian "spin dictators" demand less sweeping control over citizens' lives than the USSR, preferring to deploy positive incentives, corruption, and milder repression rather than mass killings or imprisonment to stay in power (Guriev and Treisman 2022). This does not mean that rights are secure. In Russia, "autocratic legalism" (selective repression against regime opponents) promotes insecurity of property rights (Frye 2021, 99, 115). Finally, post-Soviet authoritarian regimes are also more integrated into the global economy than the USSR, and all feature some private business ownership, although major enterprises are generally controlled by the regime's allies. Eurasian political elites travel abroad freely, and indeed keep much of their property and in some cases their families in the West, even including elites in relatively closed Central Asian states (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017).

Compared to 20th-century dictators, contemporary ones are more open to international contacts, including foreign travel and the internet (Guriev and Treisman 2022, 20, 145). Thus, in Russia, "Putin prefers to the exit visa to the gulag" (Frye 2021, 125). Our survey of the post-Soviet region fleshes out and qualifies these broad statements. "Autocratic functionalism," a concept from studies of the People's Republic of China, encapsulates the approach to exit restrictions in the region. In Chinese policymaking by the Communist Party and business elites, individuals and businesses generally enjoy a relatively high level of autonomy, and restrictions are imposed when needed to serve concrete regime interests, rather than being a default policy or serving a coherent ideological agenda (Chan 2023, 140). The phrase captures contemporary Eurasian regimes' relative openness to foreign travel, coupled with significant targeted restrictions against which citizens have limited recourse and that serve the regime's interests, as opposed to a broader public interest.

3 | Categories and Modalities of Post-Soviet Exit Restrictions

Pursuing greater engagement with the outside world, contemporary Eurasian regimes have sought international affiliations that entail freedom of exit, such as the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the Helsinki Commission (formerly Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe [CSCE]), whose member states must guarantee people's free movement within, and across borders, including the right to leave their own country (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2016). Moreover, since 2009, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have committed to democratic reforms under the "Eastern Partnership" with the European Union (EU), and Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are now candidates for EU membership. Yet actual policies on exit are hedged with both de jure legislative restrictions and de facto unacknowledged ones. Across the region, only Turkmenistan's constitution does not explicitly grant citizens the right to leave the country.[3] All other national constitutions recognise such a right.[4] In part for this reason, Turkmenistan is viewed as one of the most repressive regimes in the region, even more so than neighbouring Uzbekistan (Human Rights Watch 2016). Secondly, except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, discussed below, legislated exit controls have generally not been applied to all citizens in the post-Soviet period. Rather, they are applied selectively, sometimes to prohibit specified categories, including military, security, and police employees; journalists; students; and dissidents from travelling abroad, or to achieve specific policy objectives. Third, restrictions are generally used against citizens, not foreigners, although visitors' hotel registrations may be scrutinised in the airport before departure, as Matthew Light experienced in Russia in the early 2000s and Uzbekistan in the mid-2010s.[5]

Likewise, Soviet-style "exit visas" have—formally—disappeared. However, two Central Asian countries retained them long after independence. Uzbekistan is the only post-Soviet country that initially required a separate exit visa for every trip outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia, and its allied post-Soviet states (US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy 2016c). Those who travelled to other countries without an "exit visa" faced high fines or even imprisonment of up to 10 years (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy) 2018). In 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced an end to exit visas, which were phased out by 2021 (US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy 2020; Sharkov 2017; Turaeva 2025, 8). However, in practice, exit control has reportedly merely shifted from the issuing of the visa to that of the passport.

Turkmenistan's president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, has also maintained de facto exit restrictions. Turkmenistan has been dubbed "the most authoritarian of all former Soviet states" (Stronski 2017), and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are sometimes compared with North Korea in terms of their repressiveness and isolation. While Turkmenistan cancelled its formal exit visa requirement in 2004, an extensive "black list" of citizens is banned from exit (Baumgartner 2018). Students are particular targets (Human Rights Watch 2016, 2017), perhaps to prevent political activism abroad. The government also restricts the subjects students may study at foreign institutions (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy) 2016b). More broadly, the government since 2018 apparently sought to impede the travel abroad of men under 40, although evidently not all such men are prevented from leaving. The tacit policy may be meant to keep workers in the country (Freedom House 2024; V Turkmenistane vveli zapret na vyezd za rubezh muzhchinam mladshe 30 let 2018).

Even within the post-Soviet region, Central Asian countries rely on neighbours such as Russia to prevent their citizens' onward travel to the West without the required exit documents (Turaeva 2025). However, they do not replicate the Soviet policy of largely banning foreign travel. Indeed, Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian countries, sends millions of its citizens abroad as guest workers, mainly to Russia (Light 2016), with millions of family members at home depending on remittances. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan either scrutinise every application for travel abroad (Uzbekistan) and/or ban a significant proportion of the population from leaving (Turkmenistan). Although these two countries are particularly notorious, their policies are hardly unique, even within Central Asia. For example, Tajikistan extensively screens students wishing to study abroad to ensure that their travel does not impair state interests (Yusufi 2018; Aripov 2018).

At the opposite extreme, four post-Soviet countries—Ukraine (before the onset of the current full-scale Russian invasion in 2022), Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova—exhibit freedom of exit on par with other European states and are also typically the highest-ranked on other indices of democracy and personal freedom in the region. Most other post-Soviet states fall in the middle of this spectrum, applying significant international travel restrictions on citizens. Granted, in all modern societies, "the monopolisation of the legitimate means of movement," makes individuals reliant on the state to cross borders (Torpey 2000, 4). Yet most post-Soviet countries administer highly expansive travel restrictions, often applied to specific population categories, including political activists (and sometimes their relatives), journalists, military or security service personnel, and even debtors.

Eurasian regimes use exit restrictions against their opponents, whether to prevent their political activity, prevent foreigners from hearing them, or simply to punish them. As noted above, some regimes, notably Russia, encourage prominent opponents to emigrate and do not routinely impede their departure. However, there are exceptions. In 2012, Belarus's current autocratic president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, prevented the exit of former president Stanislau Shushkevich for unspecified reasons, although under Belarusian law, exit can be denied only to debtors, conscription-evaders, and criminal suspects (Former Belarus Leader Barred From Leaving Country 2012). Likewise, the late Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalnyi was prevented from travelling abroad in 2018 for a hearing in the European Court of Human Rights on his complaints against the Russian government (Navalny not allowed to leave Russia 2018). Later, Navalnyi nearly died from an attempted poisoning, and subsequently left Russia for medical treatment in Germany, returning to Russia only to be arrested, convicted, and die in prison. The 2018 denial of exit, which

was not officially explained, may have aimed to prevent his testimony, or to serve as a milder sanction before the regime decided to eliminate him physically, or both. Also, in the 2018 denial of his exit, Navalnyi intended to return to Russia and continue oppositional activity, rather than leave Russia permanently (which might have been permitted).

Other examples across the region feature less famous activists, or their family members. In 2015, the Tajikistan government banned the Islamic Renaissance Party, the only real opposition, accusing it of being a terrorist organisation. Although most party leaders then left Tajikistan, some remaining family members came under de facto exit bans. Thus, the authorities blocked the foreign travel for medical treatment of the four-year-old grandson of Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the banned party (Human Rights Watch 2018); as well as the daughter of another activist, Shabnam Hudoydova, who was removed from an international flight to rejoin her mother in Europe. Under pressure from international human rights organisations, both children were eventually allowed to leave the country. While the Soviet government and communist Poland sometimes frustrated their citizens' foreign travel by denying exit to family members (Brunarska 2025), our limited review suggests contemporary Eurasian governments deploy such "relational repression" (Moss 2016) in a more strategic manner. Future studies could examine whether it is applied more often against high-profile opponents, or to relatively obscure activists with limited means to resist or publicize their plight. Likewise, Russia's recent history of assassinating its opponents, sometimes abroad, seems to contradict the relatively limited use of similar exit bans: perhaps facilitating troublemakers' exit is the path of least resistance, with physical liquidation held in reserve to encourage them to keep quiet once they are out of Russia.

While post-Soviet governments generally offer legal pretexts to prevent opponents' exit, they overtly restrict the foreign travel of military and security service personnel. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, military and security service personnel with access to state secrets may not leave the country during their employment or for 5 years thereafter (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy) 2016a, 2016b). In Kyrgyzstan, military and security service personnel may not leave until any intelligence to which they were privy has been declassified (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy) 2020). Kazakhstan restricts all men of conscription age from travelling abroad (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy) 2016a). In Russia, an existing ban on exit by military and security and intelligence service personnel was expanded in 2010 to all staff—not just those with access to sensitive intelligence—after Federal Security Service (FSB) Colonel Alexander Poteyev defected to the United States and revealed the identities of Russian spies there and in the United Kingdom (Ryzhkov 2014). There are approximately four million personnel affected by the ban,[6] including rank-and-file police officers as well as senior staff such as the defence minister and head of the Federal Security Service. The Russian Government claimed this policy encourages fellow Russians to support the ailing tourism industry of occupied Crimea (Lemondzhava 2016).

In addition, tens of thousands of specialists and officials with access to classified information are also denied exit, including engineers or IT specialists in defence industries and in regional and federal governments. This restriction is typically included in their contract and lasts for 5 years after the end of employment.[7] Following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, amendments to the Federal Law on Entry and Exit increased the fine for unauthorised exit to 500 thousand rubles (about USD $5000) or up to 3 years' imprisonment (Federal'nyj zakon ot 13.06.2023 No 212-FZ). These policies reflect the regime's suspicions of its own armed servants and suggest a strong risk-aversion where this coercive apparatus is concerned.

Some countries also restrict exit based on debt, including unpaid taxes, fines, alimony, child support payments, court judgements, and even utility payments. Some illustrative examples:

- *Azerbaijan*: In 2021 more than 6000 people were denied foreign travel because of unpaid tax debts (Kogda mozhet byt' postavlen "STOP" na vyezd iz strany? 2022). Dozens of such bans involve critical journalists and activists, suggesting a political motivation (Movlamli 2024).
- *Kazakhstan*: In 2013, the government prohibited 80,000 debtors from leaving the country (Kazakhstan prohibits 80,000 debtors from leaving the country 2014). While opposition politicians called for the exit ban to be limited to only a few forms of debt, such as failure to pay child support,[8] in 2018, more than 4000 citizens of Kazakhstan could not leave the country because of their tax debt (Lada News of Aktau and Magistau 2018).
- *Uzbekistan*: In 2018, the government banned individuals from exiting for unpaid electricity or water bills exceeding 344,480 soums or USD $43 (Fergana Information Agency 2018b), instructing air and rail companies to cross-check all customers for such debt before selling tickets. Moreover, all individuals living in the same apartment may become subject to the exit ban (Fergana Information Agency 2018a).
- *Russia*: Until October 2017, anyone owing more than 10,000 rubles (approximately 160 euros) in unpaid bank loans, alimony, taxes or fines could be prohibited from leaving the country. From that date, the exit ban threshold was raised to 30,000 rubles, except for alimony and compensation for damages to health. Using a database maintained by the Federal Bailiff Service, the authorities detain thousands of debtors a year in airports and railway stations on their way out of the country (Lawmakers May Soften Travel Ban for Russian Debtors 2016; V nevyezdnom dolgu 2018). In 2023, the Bailiff Service restricted the travel of 16.4 million debtors abroad, an increase of 6.3% on 2022. By the beginning of 2024, the Border Service had 6.5 million such active files (Koshkina and Chernysheva 2024). In the first nine months of 2023, twenty-one million Russians had unpaid debts to banks alone (Mingazov 2023).

Compared to industrialised democracies, although perhaps not to Global South countries, post-Soviet states' policies on exit by debtors exhibit greater scope and severity, applying to private debts, including relatively modest ones, as well as to public ones. A class dynamic may be at play: (generally richer) creditors can

prevent (generally poorer) debtors from leaving. Such policies do not obviously reflect the "regime survival" motivations of Soviet-era exit restrictions, but rather a distinctive post-Soviet combination of highly unequal societies and strong bureaucratic institutions, creating a dynamic in which the rich can keep working-class people in their place—literally. There may also be an indirect connection to regime interests, since in most post-Soviet countries, being rich also entails being connected to the political elite. Future studies could compare such policies with their counterparts in other contemporary authoritarian capitalist states to test these interpretations.

The cost of post-Soviet passports or exit visas can also be burdensome. Thus, in 2014, the fee for an Uzbekistan exit visa was approximately 1 month's salary (Islamov 2014).[9] In the mid-2000s, a passport in Tajikistan cost 13.4% of annual per capita income; in Azerbaijan, 2.5%; in Ukraine, 2.7%; and interestingly in Russia, only 0.41%. In contrast, the cost of a Canadian passport is pegged at approximately 0.26% of annual per capita income (McKenzie 2007). These fees effectively tax departing labour migrants. In the Soviet Union, exit restrictions prevented workers from denying their labour to the state (Light 2016, 34). Today, coerced labour for the state remains prevalent in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where every year millions of adults and sometimes children are forced under threats of violence or job loss to harvest the cotton that makes both countries leading exporters (Fischer-Daly 2016). Perhaps citizens who "vote with their feet" to start over in a new country (Torpey 2000, 162) must pay for the privilege? Yet post-Soviet states that are generally less restrictive of exit, and certainly do not engage in forced labour, notably Ukraine, also impose high fees for passports, perhaps suggesting this is simply revenue-seeking, reflecting the convenience of enforcement, rather than a device to control labour. High official fees may also promote bribery in exchange for the required document (or exit without the document), as has been attested in Turkmenistan (Baumgartner 2018).

Unlike the USSR, post-Soviet governments deploy targeted and ad hoc restrictions and more indirect ways of enforcing them, against a backdrop of generalised permissiveness. As noted above, the Georgian government's vetting of students being considered for scholarships for study abroad furnishes one such example: here, rather than directly banning particular citizens' travel abroad, public financial support is selectively provided to promote exit by those deemed trustworthy, and witheld to impede exit by others. Likewise, in 2015, a Turkish military airplane shot down a Russian fighter jet in Syria, leading President Putin to retaliate by prohibiting Russian travel agencies from selling popular all-inclusive package trips to Turkey to Russian citizens (Jenkins 2015). While tourist visits to Turkey were not prohibited outright, this ban did prevent Russian consumers from accessing the most convenient and lowest-cost travel option. Although Russo-Turkish relations eventually improved, and Russian tourists flooded back into Turkey, the incident showcases how post-Soviet governments manage citizens' foreign travel using private actors. It also suggests the Russian government's basic inclination is to direct citizens' tourism away from countries it wishes to punish economically—just as the United States has done with respect to Cuba—rather than ban foreign travel altogether. Many of the Russian tourists who were kept from visiting Turkey ended up holidaying in Greece, Cyprus, and Georgia, rather than inside Russia.

4 | Russia and Ukraine in Wartime: The Exit Privilege Tested

Putin's onslaught on Ukraine in February 2022 led to the most rapid exodus from Russia since the early 1990s economic crisis, as Russian citizens fled possible conscription and other hazards. In the first year of the war, about 800,000 Russians emigrated—including many young men of military age, as well as IT specialists and other professionals—with Kazakhstan, Georgia, Turkey, and Armenia the most popular destinations (Zavadskaya 2023). To some observers' surprise, Russia tolerated this outflow and even drove some noted opponents, such as the leftwing academic Boris Kagarlitsky, to flee the country with threats of prosecution. Even three years later, the only new exit ban applies to men who received a conscription notice after the partial mobilisation in September 2022. While entry to some Western countries is more difficult, Russian citizens continue to travel abroad largely unimpeded. In essence, the Russian regime balances its need for soldiers and labour against the need to limit public opposition to the war. Russia's politically engaged urban middle class residents of Moscow and other major cities live in an internationalised world of foreign holiday travel, globalised consumption, and social media. Restricting emigration would be highly unpopular, signalling a return to a Soviet-style police state. Allowing the discontented to leave thus limits active opposition to the war.

Maintaining the "open-door" emigration policy has produced a skilled labour force shortage, with the outflow of young professionals and students particularly hampering military production (Stognei and Ivanova 2023). IT specialists have left the country in droves despite special benefits and allowances to retain them. According to the Russian Central Bank, in August 2023, 60% of non-financial firms were experiencing a labour shortage. In addition, the surplus of job vacancies over available workers increased from 14.3 percentage points in 2022 to 23.8 in 2023. Of course, the mass departure of foreign businesses and burdensome military procurements also contributed to this labour shortage. Thus, although the exodus of young people and skilled workers harms Russia's long-term economic prospects, the Putin regime currently benefits politically from emigration.[10]

Yet, with the war dragging on, Russians increasingly criticise those who have left the country since the 2022 mobilisation. Forty-nine percent of respondents to an April 2024 survey by the Levada Centre expressed hostility to émigrés, with only 6% taking a positive view (Levada Centre 2023). Proposals have already been made in parliament to close the borders and confiscate émigré property, and the authorities are exploring other options for limiting departure abroad. Thus, in late 2023, men under 30 eligible for mobilisation were ordered to surrender their passports (Vitkine 2023). Russia may even be seeking to influence foreign countries to make it difficult for Russians to enter them. Thus, an attempted mass inflow of undocumented migrants, staged by Russian intelligence at Russo-Finnish border crossings in late 2023, led Finland to close those ports of entry entirely (Moshes 2023).[11]

The victim of Russia's aggression, Ukraine, has also experienced an exodus, with millions of Ukrainians now refugees throughout Europe and overseas. However, unlike Russia, Ukraine has severely restricted exit by military-age men, through executive decrees under the state of emergency in effect since February 2022 (Marushak 2023), although certain categories are exempt (e.g., men already residing abroad, fathers with three or more minor children). The policy is notably gendered: it originally included men between 18 and 25, although Ukraine has so far resisted general mobilisation of this age group, and all women are exempt, even as women have joined the military in unprecedented numbers (Darden 2023). These gendered exit restrictions have also resulted in widespread separation of families, as many women with children live abroad whose partners are trapped in Ukraine.

Thus, Ukraine's fractious democracy has paradoxically adopted the very draconian exit policy that Russia's autocracy has eschewed. Why? Certainly, Russia's population is more than three times larger than Ukraine's, yielding more potential soldiers to prosecute Putin's aggression. Indeed, Russia has generally fielded soldiers from poor and ethnic-minority backgrounds rather than those from Moscow and other major cities, as well as former prisoners, whereas Ukraine's soldiers come from all walks of life. In addition, as noted above, the Putin regime offers citizens a privatised life of consumption, while excluding them from political decisions; wartime restrictions threaten this bargain. In contrast, Ukraine is a transitional democracy fighting for its existence. Yet, while the basic premise that citizens should defend the state against annihilation seems broadly accepted, there are limits to the restrictions that the public will tolerate. As this article was approaching publication, the government abruptly announced that young men aged 18–22 would no longer be prevented from traveling abroad, an attempt to blunt public dissatisfaction with exit restrictions that in turn stimulated a predictable exodus (Odarchenko and Golovata 2025)

5 | Conclusion: Soviet Blanket, Post-Soviet Patchwork

Some broad points stand out from our review. First, exit in contemporary Eurasia has experienced a convergence with contemporary authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world. No contemporary Eurasian country imposes blanket foreign travel prohibitions on all or nearly all citizens like those of the Soviet Union. Echoing Light's (2012) analysis of Soviet exit restrictions as inherent to the Soviet mobilisational state, Soviet policies thus figure as an extreme manifestation of what authoritarian exit restrictions *can* mean, rather than what they *must* mean, or even *will usually* mean, in other authoritarian contexts. Closing the border to exit altogether is no longer the default policy, as Eurasian regimes find it sometimes to their advantage to open it. As noted, post-Soviet elites are hedonistic and value their connections with the West; they pursue the preservation of their privileges and the existing power structure rather than any ideological program; and they prefer control of discourse and information over riskier and more costly forms of overt repression (see, e.g., Dawisha 2014 and Guriev and Treisman 2022). As suggested by the similarities between the guest-worker sending countries of Central Asia and comparators such as Eritrea and North Korea, the post-Soviet flexible, "autocratic functionalist" approach governing whether and how exit is granted has more in common with other contemporary authoritarian regimes than with the Soviet Union.

Post-Soviet states' exit restrictions now also present a more complex patchwork of motivations, modalities, and targets than the USSR's did. In contrast to the Soviet fixation on keeping all citizens at home and isolating them from the external world as a pillar of the regime's survival, contemporary authorities balance more complex and sometimes conflicting political and economic goals, as the Russian government is now experiencing. Class and social position now influence exit opportunities in different ways than in the Soviet Union. Whereas for the USSR foreign travel was a privilege reserved primarily for elites and certain loyal citizens, post-Soviet elites are deeply connected to the outside world and treat their access to it as a matter of course; governing the foreign travel of the elite is thus a way of policing their loyalty against a backdrop of greater openness. As in, say, Venezuela or the People's Republic of China, high-level Russian officials now face greater scrutiny of their travel abroad than do more humble citizens without politically sensitive positions. Indeed, as discussed above, post-Soviet regimes, with some exceptions, display less concern with coercing the labour of their working class than did the USSR. Likewise, restricting foreign travel by private debtors also broadens the goals of exit restrictions, from those of the state itself to those of the ruling political elite (or even ruling socioeconomic class). Likely as a result, the most frequent policy is selective prohibition of exit by certain population categories, whether explicit or informal, or indeed ad hoc or targeted denials. Eurasian regimes' cooperation with one another to control citizens' onward travel also resembles the third-party controls described by Macklin (2025) rather than the monolithic and unilateral Soviet controls. Thus, while we broadly share the "spin dictator" interpretation of post-Soviet exit restrictions, our analysis reveals significant variation in how exit regulation is exercised.

Again, unlike the USSR, most of these states are now "demobilisational", rather than "mobilisational." While governments continue to invest heavily in their coercive institutions (see, e.g., Taylor 2011), the goal is not generally to enlist citizens in support of the regime, but rather to prevent political engagement altogether. Yes, active opponents are still targeted for sanctions, including exit denial. But even in such high-level cases, post-Soviet governments paradoxically enjoy more freedom to govern their subjects' mobility as they please than the Soviet Union ever did. Freed from the necessity to control everyone, all the time, contemporary Eurasian regimes can now restrict foreign travel in a far more boutique fashion, tailoring their response to highly specific categories or even individual cases to the contingent needs of any given moment or situation. Post-Soviet regimes' predilection for informality and unwritten policies [see, e.g., Ledeneva 2013] enhances their freedom of action even further, as there is no requirement of consistency. Again, the USSR's highly centralised exit policies and border controls are less on point than the more flexible practices of other contemporary authoritarian states.

We have also categorised post-Soviet states by their policies on exit. At one extreme, a liberal group comprising Moldova,

Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine (before 2022) has approximately converged with Western European policies on exit, although even they often fleece their unfortunate citizens when issuing travel documents. At the other extreme, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (and perhaps other Central Asian states) apparently prevent more of their citizens from leaving than do all other regimes, and exercise greater scrutiny over each departure abroad. In the middle, we find authoritarian countries with varied motivations for restricting exit: controlling dissent, preventing defection or capture of military and security personnel, and governing the poor, i.e., debtors. These categories track differences in overall political freedom, and perhaps Western political leverage, rather than economic development. Thus, more restrictive Russia is richer in income per capita than the four most liberal countries noted above. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which are highly restrictive, are also very poor and relatively buffered from Western influence, but not necessarily dramatically poorer than every other Central Asian regime or Moldova. Ukraine since 2022 is an obvious exception. It is one of the most successful transitional democracies in the region, and a candidate for EU membership, yet military-age men are now broadly prohibited from leaving, pointing to the need for a separate analysis of emergency powers in democratic regimes, such as Taiwan, noted above (Fan 2025). As in the USSR, "regime survival" remains a possible motivation for exit restrictions, even in democracies. Nonetheless, their restrictions are either much less extreme than the USSR's (Taiwan) or are temporary emergency measures (Ukraine).

In contrast, the intermediate group—Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and possibly Tajikistan—includes most post-Soviet citizens and represents a kind of post-Soviet average, where exit is widely accessible to most people, but can be blocked at the regime's discretion with very little recourse. While the exact reasons for variation within this middling group are left to future studies, such differences are likely to be contingent and circumstantial, based on specific incentives facing each regime at a particular moment, rather than reflecting the overall level of freedom in a regime. It is also likely that the uncertainty surrounding exit restrictions itself serves a political function in these moderately repressive Eurasian states. We note that governments that wish to prevent a person from exiting can usually find a reason to do so: in Russia, a legal reference service identified ten official reasons for denial of exit (KonsultantPlyus 2024). Thus, the subject's ability to move around is not an effective right maintained by a regime accountable to a wide coalition of people united by values of self-government and human rights. This distinguishes the greater permeability of contemporary Eurasian states from actual "open societies" (Gaus 2021, 248). These three groupings of Eurasian states are summarized below in Table 1.

Given Eurasia's convergence with global authoritarian trends, is there nonetheless any "post-Soviet" specificity to exit policies in the region? On the one hand, Eurasian states enjoy greater coercive capacity than some Global South governments, making it harder for citizens to evade denials of exit and therefore preempting scenarios such as Eritrea's or Venezuela's illicit but tolerated mass departures of the poor. On the other hand, the noteworthy informality of post-Soviet institutions, noted above, may also multiply opportunities for corruption or other private or non-standard disposition of conflicts over exit—at least outside highly sensitive cases such as that of Navalny and other top dissidents, where raison d'état considerations dictate high-level decision-making. Light's (2016) study of residence permits in Russian regions found that the Kremlin tolerated a surprising level of de facto local control over issuing these vital documents, prompting the question of whether exit is similarly informalised in Russia and other Eurasian states. The weakness of labour and close links between economic and political elites in Eurasia could also be contributing to some national policies, such as the widespread use of exit restrictions against debtors. Future studies could measure the impact of these and other characteristic features of the region to specify further the exact place of Eurasia in the global landscape of exit restrictions.

TABLE 1 | Approximate groupings of contemporary Eurasian states by degree of openness to exit.

Degree of openness to exit	States included	Characteristic exit policies
Most liberal	Ukraine (pre-2022), Georgia, Armenia, Moldova	Broad convergence with European exit norms
Intermediate	Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan; possibly some Central Asian states	Targeted restrictions on senior officials, debtors, regime opponents Indirect/third-party restrictions
Most restrictive	Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, possibly other Central Asian states	Longer retention of "exit visas" and other blanket restrictions Greater coercion of would-be labour migrants Agreements with Russia and other third countries to limit onward travel

In closing, if we revisit to the historical significance of Soviet exit restrictions for people in our era, the global triumph of capitalism, albeit often with authoritarian politics, seems to leave the USSR's sweeping prohibitive policies a historical curiosity, rather than a template for future states. As suggested above, the Soviet Union's highly prohibitive approach imposed substantial costs on the regime, including human and material resources dedicated to administration, and lost opportunities for more tailored manipulation of exit privileges. Granted, increasing conflict in the international system, illustrated here by the invasion of Ukraine and apparent in other recent East–West confrontations such as the 2021 Poland–Belarus border crisis, in which Russia's authoritarian ally Belarus attempted to flood the EU with Middle Eastern migrants (Caballero-Vélez et al. 2024), suggests the current regime of international travel may be fraying. Moreover, while restricting exit in post-Soviet Eurasia has lost the high salience for state survival that it

possessed for the Soviet Union, the power of permitting, denying, and manipulating exit remains an important lever for governments. In contemporary Eurasia, while more citizens can travel abroad when they wish, states remain the biggest winners from exit liberalisation.

Acknowledgements

We thank Samantha Power for her very substantial research assistance in producing a detailed report on the policies of interest in this study. We also thank Khamza Sharifzoda, and Sohail Shahidnia for their excellent research assistance. We thank participants at workshops at the Universities of Toronto, Haifa, and Tel Aviv for valuable comments.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.70118.

Endnotes

[1] We use "post-Soviet" and "Eurasian" as synonyms for the region formerly ruled by the USSR. Although broadly familiar, "post-Soviet" is increasingly avoided by the region's residents because it implies the USSR remains central to their identity.

[2] For example, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin argued in 1907 that restrictions on international migration were forms of capitalist oppression that the international workers' movement should oppose (Lenin 1972, 79).

[3] Article 39 of the Turkmenistan constitution: 'Every citizen shall have the right to move freely and choose their place of residence within Turkmenistan'.

[4] All other regional constitutions grant citizens the right to freely exit and return to the country of origin. Ukraine (Article 33: free to leave 'with the exception of restrictions established by law'); Uzbekistan (Article 28: 'A citizen of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall have the right to freedom of movement on the territory of the Republic, as well as to free entry to and exit from it except for the events specified by law'). See http://www.legislationline.org; for Armenia, see http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=constitution&lang=eng.

[5] Of course, Russia's practice of arresting and prosecuting Western, particularly US, citizens (many of whom are then traded back for Russian prisoners in the West) functionally limits their exit.

[6] This figure includes the Interior Ministry (1.3 million personnel), Defence Ministry (2 million), Federal Prison Service (326,000), Federal Drug Control Service (40,000), employees of the Prosecutor General's Office (63,000), Federal Bailiff Service employees (23,000), Federal Migration Service (34,500) and Emergency Situations Ministry employees (20,000).

[7] Vasilii Peskarev, the chair of the Committee on Security of the Russian parliament, reported that more than 16,000 people with access to state secrets, or who have property or close relatives abroad, are subject to this policy; see https://t.me/rian_ru/203584 (last visited 19 August 2024).

[8] Prime Minister of Kazakhstan (2016, September 23) The prohibition of departure abroad Kazakhstan debtors should be used in exceptional cases. Available from: https://primeminister.kz/en/news/sotsialnaya_sfera/zapret-na-viezd-iz-kazahstana-dolzhnikam-dolzhen-primenyatsya-v-iskluchitelnih-sluchayah-13181.

[9] For details, see also http://www.goldenpages.uz/zarplata/.

[10] And on the positive side, the liberal emigration policy helps Russian businesses evade Western economic sanctions through informal transborder trade.

[11] The refugee flood may also have been meant to support anti-immigration, pro-Russia forces in Finnish politics; personal communication from Esko Yli-Hemminki to first author.

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Appendix A

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