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# Stavropol as “Russia’s Kosovo”? Nationalist mobilization and public response in a Russian region

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## ABSTRACT

Russian nationalism after Crimea is commonly depicted as aggressive and expansionist – but few Russian ethno-nationalists would accept this description. Quite the contrary: they would argue that ethnic Russians as the majority population find themselves under “under siege” from ethnic minorities. A case in point, they hold, is Stavropol Krai in the North Caucasus. In local ethno-nationalist circles this region is depicted as “Russia’s Kosovo,” a glaring example of the Kremlin’s betrayal of ethnic Russian interests. This article presents a case study of the under-researched regional dimension of Russian nationalism. The purpose is twofold: to map regional ethnonationalist discourse and, drawing on survey data, to explore to what extent this discourse is reflected in general attitudes toward the influx of migrants and plans for own migration. We find that local ethno-nationalists have succeeded in mobilizing support at the national level, but that, despite increased ethnic tensions in Stavropol Krai, few Russians contemplate leaving.

## KEYWORDS

Stavropol; Russian nationalism; migrants; migrantophobia; collective voice; individual exit

After Russia’s March 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russian nationalism is commonly depicted as aggressive and expansionist (Blank 2015; Kuzio 2016). Moreover, Putin’s speech on the occasion of Crimea and Sevastopol’s formal accession to the Russian Federation, where he bemoaned the fate of the ethnic Russians as “one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders” (Putin 2014), is interpreted as signaling an ethnic turn: for the first time, the Russian authorities were appealing directly to the ethnic Russian nation (*ruskii narod*) (Hale 2016; Kolstø 2016; Teper 2016). Very few Russian nationalists would agree, however. If Putin were genuinely concerned about the plight of ethnic Russians, he would have done more for Russians in Russia, they insist. Voicing misgivings about the powers-that-be, they argue that far from advancing Russian ethno-nationalism, the Kremlin continues to neglect the interests of the Russian nation – and so the nation’s future is under threat (Krylov 2012; Sevast’yanov 2013a).

That claim flies in the face of common sense: Russians represent the majority population in the country (around 80%), and after returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin has emphasized the role of ethnic Russians in the state- and nation-building project (Rutland 2012; Blakkisrud 2016). Still, in some regions, ethnic Russians *are* feeling uneasy and are leaving in droves – as observed in the North Caucasian republics for some time now (Belozеров, Panin, and Chikhichin 2008). In some parts of the North Caucasus there are virtually no ethnic Russians left.

In Russian ethno-nationalist circles, the North Caucasus is increasingly seen as lost to the Russians; culturally, these republics were never an integral part of Russia anyway, it is argued.<sup>1</sup> The problems do not stop there, however: the real battle, according to some ethno-nationalists, has moved to traditionally Russian-dominated territories north of the Caucasus Mountains – to Stavropol Krai. With ethnic Russians allegedly being pushed out of this krai by ever-increasing numbers of migrants from the North Caucasian republics, Konstantin Krylov, a leader of the Russian ethno-nationalist opposition, has warned of imminent “hostile colonization” (quoted in Ryazanov 2014). Stavropol is framed as a critical case, a testing ground for the resilience of the Russian nation and the survival of the Russian state (Belyaev 2012; Antonov 2013).

The literature on contemporary Russian nationalism – be it the state-sponsored version or the kinds espoused by the opposition or more marginal nationalist fringe groups – generally focuses on developments at the federal level (Tolz 2004; Laruelle 2009, 2010; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016). This article brings in the regional dimension. Additionally, whereas the mobilization of xenophobia and the role of migrants as the new “Other” in Russian identity discourse have been explored (Pain 2007; Alexseev 2010b; Laruelle 2010; Mukomel’ 2011; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016; Markowitz and Peshkova 2016), we further develop the nationalism–migrant nexus by exploring the effect of *internal* migration on nationalist mobilization. Our aim is twofold: to explore the regional dimension of Russian ethno-nationalist discourse through a case study of a regional agenda; and, drawing on survey data, to establish whether this discourse is reflected in local attitudes toward migrants and migration.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion proceeds as follows. First we provide a snapshot of Stavropol Krai as well as a review of the literature on migrantophobia, the “othering” of culturally alien migrants, and “white flight.” We then proceed to present the regional ethno-nationalist discourse in Stavropol, summarized in the framing of the krai as an ethnic “buffer” protecting the Russian lands against peoples from the North Caucasus, or, alternatively, as representing a cultural-religious “civilizational fault-line,” with Stavropol at the intersection of the Christian and Muslim worlds. We also investigate the linkages between regional and federal-level discourses to explore how regional ethno-nationalist discourse interacts with – and is framed by – the federal agenda. Finally, drawing on survey results, we ask whether the alarmist rhetoric adopted by the ethno-nationalists seems to resonate with the local ethnic Russian majority population: Do ethnic Russians residing in the krai perceive migrants from the neighboring republics as a threat? And if so, does this perception translate into plans for abandoning the krai and settling elsewhere?

### **Stavropol – a snapshot**

The city of Stavropol was founded in 1777 as a military outpost of the expanding Russian Empire. Since then, the surrounding territory – the current eponymous krai – has been ethnically dominated by Russians and Cossacks. Traditionally, the local economy has been oriented toward agriculture. The western part of the krai forms part of the fertile black-soil belt. Further east, closer to the border with Dagestan, the climate becomes semi-arid, and sheep-herding pastoralism replaces agriculture. In the Caucasus foothills to the south, the tourism industry centered on the spa and resort towns of Kavkazskie Mineral’nye Vody from the early nineteenth century onwards has formed a mainstay of the local economy (O’Loughlin, Panin, and Witmer 2007, 250).

Over the years, the boundaries of the Stavropol region have frequently changed. Today’s krai borders on no less than five of the seven North Caucasian republics – Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. To the north lies the Republic of Kalmykia. Only to the west does it border on “regular,” Russian-dominated administrative entities (Krasnodar and Rostov) (see Figure 1). Since 2010 Stavropol Krai has been home to the administrative center of the North Caucasus Federal District, located in the city of Pyatigorsk. In addition to Stavropol, this federal district (okrug) consists of six ethnically defined republics. This new administrative entity was established to address the specific challenges facing the North Caucasus: this is Russia’s least economically developed region, characterized by economic dislocation, soaring unemployment, and persistent security concerns. It is also the only



Figure 1. Map of Stavropol Krai and its constituent raiony (created by the authors).

Table 1. Dynamics of the ethnic composition of Stavropol Krai, Soviet/Russian census data (in percent).

	1959	1979	1989	2002	2010
Russians	91.3	87.7	84.0	81.6	80.1
Ukrainians	2.4	2.4	2.6	1.7	1.1
Armenians	1.5	1.8	2.9	5.5	5.8
Greeks	0.7	1.0	1.1	1.3	1.2
Nogais	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8
Dargins	0.1	0.7	1.3	1.5	1.8
Chechens	0.0	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.4
Other	3.5	5.4	6.8	7.1	8.8

Source: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/pril.php>.

federal district in the Russian Federation where ethnic Russians are not in the majority: according to the 2010 census, they comprised less than a third of the total population. According to 2016 estimates, Stavropol Krai has a population of approximately 2.8 million. While the krai, unlike the federal district, remains overwhelmingly Russian in ethnic composition (see Table 1), the aggregated data mask a marked shift in the ethnic geography. In recent years, the krai has become a primary destination for migrants from the North Caucasian republics, with Dargins, Chechens, and Armenians settling in the east and south, and Russians moving to the north and west. “What distinguishes the krai is the increasing share of non-Russians and a regional stratification of the population along ethnic lines. Taken to an extreme, this sorting could lead to ethnic spatial polarization” (O’Loughlin, Panin, and Witmer 2007, 265). Moreover, high birthrates among some migrant groups contrast with the natural decrease among the ethnic Russian population (Belozerov, Panin, and Chikhichin 2008, 34–41). In the 2010 census, the share of ethnic Russians in two of the easternmost *raiony*, Kurskii and Neftekumskii, dipped below the psychologically important 50% mark for the first time.

The changing ethno-demographic dynamics have caused apprehension among politicians and the expert community alike: Stavropol has been singled out as a major potential interethnic-tension hotspot (TsINK 2014), recast in the nationalist discourse “as the last ‘bastion’ of Russia in the hostile North Caucasus,” as a potential “Russian Kosovo” (Foxall 2013).

### **Nationalist rhetoric and fear-induced migration**

How does exposure to ethnic minorities influence the majority group’s tolerance toward such minorities? While advocates of contact theory argue that (positive) intergroup contacts will gradually improve mutual understanding by reducing prejudice and social distance (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), adherents of conflict/group threat theory hold that, far from stimulating tolerance, increased diversity tends to reduce social solidarity (Quillian 1995; Putnam 2007). Most agree, however, that rapid growth in the share of the ethnic minority population tends to stimulate the development of defensive ethnic nationalism within the majority group: an increasing concentration of immigrants in a given locality stokes fear of neighborhood takeover as well as anti-migrant sentiments (Hopkins 2011; Kaufmann and Harris 2014). The migrantophobia that feeds such defensive nationalism may be based on what the majority population perceives as an *economic* threat to their privileged position (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). When representatives of the majority group hold that certain local resources and benefits should belong exclusively to their own group, migrants are cast as competitors or freeloaders (Quillian 1995; Bahry 2016), pushing out low-skilled locals from the labor market, and potentially undermining real estate values.

But it is not all about the pocketbook. Perceived threats to the majority *culture/identity* are central in shaping migrantophobia and fear-driven nationalism; studies of public opinion on immigration have found that perceptions of cultural threat often outweigh perceptions of economic threat when trying to explain migrantophobia (Sides and Citrin 2007, 501; Kaufmann 2014). Especially when migrants differ in religion or race from the majority group, negative attitudes will flourish (Gang, Rivera-Batiz, and Yun 2002; Hopkins 2011).

The perceived threats related to the influx of migrants may also be subdivided according to whether these are seen to arise from *objective* conditions or a more *subjective* understanding of the challenges involved (Hopkins 2011, 500–501; Semyonov, Gorodzeisky, and Glikman 2012). In the first category, the actual size and concentration of the new minority communities feature prominently. But anti-immigrant attitudes may also be explained through subjective perceptions about the impact immigrants have on local identity and culture. Threat is not purely a question of numbers: even in the virtual absence of migrants, migrantophobia may find fertile ground. Moreover, surveys reveal that there is a widespread tendency among respondents to overestimate the presence of minorities in a locale (Sides and Citrin 2007; Alexseev 2010a; Hopkins 2011).

Finally, migration-related threats can be categorized as either *ego-tropic*, posing a perceived direct threat to the individual and his/her closest family, or *socio-tropic*, posing a threat to the wider community (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Whereas perceived threats to culture or identity are inherently collective (although in the extreme, they may also be seen as threatening personal physical security), economic threats can be construed as personal as well as directed against society at large (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004, 37; Dancygier and Donnelly 2013).

Faced with a looming ethno-demographic shift, the local majority population can respond by exit, voice, or loyalty (Hirschman 1978): it may accommodate the newcomers (loyalty option), mobilize to protest (voice) – or it can pack up and leave (exit). The exit option in the form of “white flight” – the unwillingness of white people to remain in neighborhoods where a growing non-white population approaches a critical tipping point – has been studied extensively in US and European contexts (Schelling 1972; Krysan 2002; Pais, South, and Crowder 2009; Kaufmann and Harris 2014, 2015). Others have studied out-migration from the perspective of “internal colonialism” (Hechter 1975) – as with the Anglophone exit from Québec (Pettinicchio 2012).

In the case of Stavropol, we want to see how subjective perceptions of migration-related threats to culture and identity translate into collective voice and/or individual exit. Our study is informed by the idea that even relatively small changes in ethnic composition may be perceived as an “existential threat” to the culture and identity of the majority population – perhaps especially so in initially homogeneous societies, like the traditionally Russian-dominated Stavropol Krai (Alexseev 2010a, 174). Although migrants from the neighboring North Caucasian republics are fellow-citizens, they are “othered,” seen as alien in culture and religion. Faced with subjective fears for their own safety and well-being, local Russians must make a decision: Do they believe that the authorities will be able to regulate the situation and integrate the newcomers? Or should they opt for collective voice – or individual exit?

For local Russian ethno-nationalists, the choice is clear: they have pursued the “voice” option, adopting a virulent anti-migrant rhetoric framing Stavropol as a potential “Russian Kosovo.” For Stavropol’s Russian population in general, however, matters are more complicated. To the extent that they share – or are susceptible to – ethno-nationalist assessments, and given the current limitations on possibilities for efficient “voice” through electoral channels, they may opt to vote with their feet, thereby potentially contributing to the realization of a “Kosovo scenario” with the local Russians leaving for Central Russia, similar to the exodus of ethnic Serbs from Kosovo to “Inner Serbia” in the 1990s.

### **The regional ethno-nationalist agenda: Stavropol antemurale**

The framing of Stavropol as a “Russian Kosovo” can be traced back to an article by Sergei Perederii, a local professor-cum-activist, who in 2010 introduced the Kosovo parallel in his “Stavropol, a Russian Kosovo?” He compared the relationship between Russians and various North Caucasian groups in the krai to the standoff between the (Slavic, Christian Orthodox) Serbs, on the one hand, and the (non-Slavic, Muslim) Albanians on the other. The end result of that standoff was the near-total exodus of Serbs from most of Kosovo.

“The deterioration of the situation in the region threatens the national security of Russia,” Perederii warned. Historically, Stavropol had served as a buffer zone – for two centuries it had defended Russia against the unruly Caucasus. More recently, it had served as a safe haven for migrants – ethnic Russians and others – fleeing war and social upheaval in the South Caucasus and some North Caucasian republics. Now, however, the situation was rapidly changing, he argued. Especially in the districts bordering Dagestan and Chechnya, the presence of Dargins and Chechens was becoming increasingly evident, while the local Russians were leaving. The influx of non-Russians had caused an “atmosphere of fear and suspicion”: “terrorist attacks, ethnic and political conflicts, kidnapping, and hostage-taking” were “becoming the norm for Stavropol,” he held. This brought “a real danger of a mass exodus of the Slavic population,” a scenario that would inevitably “serve as a source of destabilization of Southern Russia” (Perederii 2010).

Perederii’s article has been influential in shaping local ethno-nationalist discourse. We have identified two main images, or frames, that have dominated the local discourse in recent years. Both draw on Perederii’s Kosovo parallel.

### **Resisting “de-Russification” of Russian lands: Stavropol as a buffer**

In the first frame, the ethnic composition of the krai takes center stage: the need to *maintain an ethnic Russian majority*. If the ethnic balance is upset, it is argued, there is the risk of destabilizing not only the krai, but the wider Russian South. Local activists, like Sergei Popov, leader of the nationalist organization Russian Unity in the Caucasus (*Russkoe edinstvo Kavkaza*, REKA), repeatedly warn of the impending “de-Russification” of Stavropol (Spetsial’nyi korrespondent 2013). Such warnings might seem irrational – the overwhelming majority of the population continues to identify itself as ethnic Russian. However, Perederii and others stress how, in only a few decades, the population of Kosovo shifted from being relatively balanced to having a clear Albanian majority – implying that the same may happen in Stavropol unless appropriate action is taken. In search of a safe place to live, the Russian population is

leaving the eastern parts of the krai, ceding the land to the newcomers. If the current trend continues, Professor Yurii Efimov of Stavropol Agrarian University predicts, “in perspective, Stavropol may indeed become a Russian Kosovo” (quoted in Karmazin 2013).

Stavropol used to be portrayed as a “frontier,” an ethnic Russian outpost in an expanding empire, but more “defensive” imagery has recently come to the fore. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent waning of Russian influence across the former Soviet periphery, the image of Stavropol has switched from one of a “frontier” to a “frontline” (*prifrontnyi*) (Kolosov, Galkina, and Krindach 2001, 74) – or, in the words of Sergei Markedonov, a leading expert on ethno-political conflicts in the Caucasus, a “defensive wall” (*oboronitel’nyi val*) (Markedonov 2007). This is not so much a matter of the external, international border moving closer to the krai, as it is of developments in the immediate neighborhood – not least the two devastating wars in Chechnya. The new image of Stavropol as a “buffer” is also reinforced by the feeling prevalent among many ethnic Russians that, despite being the majority population, they find themselves “under siege” from ethnic minorities (Foxall 2015, 19).

The local debate presents ethnic Russians (including Cossacks) as the “indigenous population” of Stavropol (see Perederii 2010; Duma Stavropol’skogo kraia 2012). Up until the mid-twentieth century the borders were frequently redrawn, with the krai encompassing various ethnic minorities – but today, Stavropol’s “Russianness” is taken for granted. The “defensive wall” is needed to protect and preserve the present pattern of ethno-spatial differentiation. “Stavropol is not Caucasus” (*Stavropol’e – ne Kavkaz*) is a frequent trope in local ethno-nationalist discourse (Basov 2012; Foxall 2013; Natsional’nyi aktsent 2013): Stavropol was and is ethnic Russian territory.

Ethno-nationalists have proposed various initiatives aimed at preserving ethnic Russian dominance, including introducing migration quotas for ethnic minority groups from neighboring republics as well as incentives aimed at boosting the numbers of local Russians. After the establishment of the North Caucasus Federal District in 2010, a pet project among some ethno-nationalists has been to get the administrative status of Stavropol upgraded to that of a republic (Bolotnikova 2013; Bondarenko 2013; Ryazanov 2014). Stavropol is currently the only entity within this federal district that is merely a “regular” region (krai or oblast). Republic status would mean recognizing the local Russians in Stavropol as “titulars” – at least in status, if not in name. This would allow the krai authorities to pursue the same politics of preferential treatment and ethnic bias as the North Caucasian republics have cultivated for years, Sergei Popov argues:

Then the regional authorities will not be ashamed to talk about the interests of the ethnic Russians in the same way as Chechen leaders talk about the interests of the Chechens, and Dagestani [leaders] – about those of the Dagestani. From then on, our neighbors will respect us, as in the Caucasus, they understand perfectly well the meaning of someone’s land, of someone’s home. (Quoted in Ryazanov 2014)

The republic status campaign peaked in the fall of 2013 with the plans of several local ethno-nationalist organizations, fringe political parties, and other interest groups to call a Russian National Assembly focused on promoting republic status (Bondarenko 2013). However, the krai authorities foiled the initiative, using a divide-and-rule approach that left the ethno-nationalists fighting each other instead of uniting behind the republic cause. When some members of the organizing committee broke ranks and organized a rival gathering, the Congress of Slavs of Stavropol, Popov, the main architect behind the originally planned meeting, denounced the Congress as a “provocation” and the brainchild of the local authorities, and characterized Congress participants as “pocket nationalists” (RONS 2013).

The alternative to better protection of ethnic Russian interests *within* the North Caucasus Federal District would be to exit and rejoin the Southern Federal District. The “defensive wall” constituted by the krai border would then be reinforced by coinciding with the border of the federal district; the administrative linkages with the North Caucasian republics would be broken, and the Stavropol Russians “reunited” with their ethnic brethren in this overwhelmingly Russian-dominated district (in 2010, ethnic Russians comprised only 30.3% of the population of the North Caucasus Federal District, whereas their share in the Southern was 83.6%).

The professed need for redrawing federal district borders had been one of the drivers behind the 2010 establishment of REKA “to coordinate the efforts of socio-political forces in Southern Russia to resist

de-Russification, Russophobia, and xenophobia in the country as well as to provide legal protection for the Russians and other non-titulars in the North Caucasian republics” (REKA 2010). REKA collected some 10,500 signatures in support of border revision (Ol’shanskii 2013b) – far short of the 100,000 required for the issue to be entered on the State Duma agenda.

However, the matter kept popping up in the local debate. In 2013, the local branch of the (non-registered) nationalist party New Force made a new attempt, with a petition to President Putin arguing that “the active migration from the North Caucasus to Stavropol Krai has exacerbated ethnic tensions” and that the solution was a return to the Southern Federal District combined with restrictions on migration (Za vykhod 2013). Again the local authorities – supported by the presidential plenipotentiary to the North Caucasus Federal District, Aleksandr Khloponin – managed to thwart the initiative. In the end, New Force’s initiative won even less public support than REKA’s (Natsional’nyi aktsent 2013; Ol’shanskii 2013a).

Irrespective of their take on administrative status, ethno-nationalists across the board demand that the authorities terminate the “policy of squeezing out (*vydavlivanie*) the ethnic Russian population” from the krai, and stand up for their “own” (Tamantsev 2012; Ryazanov 2014). Otherwise, Stavropol might soon be lost, it is argued. By introducing a “defensive wall,” the authorities would help to keep ethnic Russians safe and in a majority position within the krai.

### ***A clash of civilizations: Stavropol as a religious and civilizational fault line***

In his treatise on the *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington drew a civilizational fault line across the North Caucasus, presenting the conflict between Moscow and Chechnya as a classic “fault-line war” (Huntington 1996, 255). But this fault line between religions, cultures, and civilizations could equally well be extended to the whole of Stavropol’s southern and eastern borders (Foxall 2015). According to Markedonov, Stavropol has already become “a distinct borderline dividing the ‘Russian world’ and the ‘Caucasian world’” (Markedonov 2009). Two dominant sub-themes within this second framing of local ethno-nationalist discourse are *the Orthodox–Muslim religious fault-line*, and the alleged *cultural incompatibility* of the “Russian way of life” with that of the “mountain peoples” (*gortsy*). As to the religious fault line, it is argued that, historically, Russians in Stavropol have not been living *together with* the Muslims, but *next to* them (Lenta.ru 2012). The new situation, in which they now live intermingled, might readily engender conflict. Popov describes the krai as a “contact zone between two civilizations, Islam and Orthodoxy” (Spetsial’nyi korrespondent 2013), a zone in which the Muslims are increasingly calling the shots. This view is largely supported by Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk:

The main reason for the outflow of the indigenous population is the uncontrolled migration from the neighboring republics. Maybe migrants also come with good intentions. But having a completely different mentality, culture, and religion, they cannot always integrate into the environment in which they have come to live ... [They behave] very aggressively and force the Russians to leave their lands. (Quoted in Interfaks Religiya 2012)

Archpriest Dmitrii Vasilenkov of the Synodal Department for Relations with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies is even less diplomatic in assessing the situation in Eastern Stavropol: “The Caucasians behave defiantly, as conquerors in an occupied country, and introduce their own laws.” Having lost their faith, the local Russians are unable to stand up for each other, and thus see no other way out other than to flee their native lands, he claims. But there is more at stake than just the eastern districts: “The bell is tolling,” Vasilenkov warns: “if we compare the situation with that of Serbian Kosovo, I would say the one here is even more frightening. ... [Islamists] are not going specifically after Stavropol, they are going after the total destruction of Russia” (Vasilenkov 2012).

A 2014 meeting of Stavropol Cossack atamans adopted a petition to presidential plenipotentiary Sergei Melikov, protesting against the “attempts at forced Islamization of Stavropol”: “Unfortunately, some mosques in our smoldering region, including in Stavropol, are not only houses of prayer, but also extremist nests cultivating hatred against the ‘infidels’.” To preserve inter-confessional peace, any construction of new mosques in the krai should require explicit approval through local referenda, they contended (Obrashchenie 2014).



On the whole, the influx of Muslim migrants from the North Caucasus is associated with the spread of radical Islam and Wahhabist teaching, with the establishment of illegal mosques and creeping Islamization, epitomized by demands for acceptance for wearing the *hijab* in public schools (Interfaks Religiya 2012; Tishkov 2013). This in turn feeds into the Kosovo myth: the scenario of the remaining Russians in the eastern part, living in isolated enclaves in a hostile sea of Muslims, is one that also could play out in Kavkazskie Mineral'nye Vody and the central regions, it is argued (Lenta.ru 2012).

The second main theme of this sub-strand – cultural incompatibility – concerns perceived threats to Russian identity and cultural cohesion as well as “ethnic crime” (*etnicheskaya prestupnost'*). According to local Russian ethno-nationalists, people from the North Caucasus actively seek to “impose their own cultural norms and ways of life on the indigenous population, norms that differ sharply from those accepted here” (Natsional'nyi aktsent 2013).

The civilizational divide is often taken for granted. The local press, for example, is full of articles about how students from the neighboring republics who arrive to study at Stavropol's North Caucasus Federal University have problems adapting to the “Russian” way of life.<sup>3</sup> While they have been growing up in the same country, and indeed in close geographical proximity to Stavropol, these young people have allegedly been raised in another world, in another civilizational sphere. Their “inability” to abide by accepted behavioral norms is frequently concretized by references to the *lezginka*, a fast-paced dance popular across the North Caucasus. When people from the republics dance the *lezginka* in public places in Stavropol, that is seen as a provocation, showing disrespect for local traditions, and an unacceptable expression of their “otherness” (Turovskii 2013). In recent years there have been numerous cases of *gortsy* being fined and students being expelled for “petty hooliganism” in connection with performing this dance (Kavkazskii uzel 2012, 2013; Foxall 2015, 69–70).

While some would prefer to have the border sealed off along the civilizational fault line (Larintseva 2013), all agree that those *gortsy* who move to Stavropol must adjust to local mores. In 2010, a bomb exploded outside the Palace of Culture and Sports in downtown Stavropol just before a scheduled performance of a Chechen folk ensemble, killing eight people and wounding many more. At the time, Vladimir Nesterov, president of the Union of Slavic Organizations in Stavropol (*Soyuz slavyanskikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii Stavropol'ya*) and a leading figure in the local ethno-nationalist movement, commented that this was only to be expected:

We wrote letters to the mayor, spoke with the leaders of the diaspora, explained that the people of Stavropol would be incensed by such ethnic dances in the main city squares, as that is not accepted behavior here (*u nas tak ne prinyato*). (Larintseva and Muradov 2010)

The image of the “Other,” the North Caucasians with their unfamiliar ways, is also one of disrespect for the law of the land, crime, and violence. Newcomers in the eastern districts are routinely accused of lacking proper registration and of operating their businesses outside the control of Russian authorities; they allegedly have no papers and do not pay taxes. The migrants continue to live according to “the law of the mountains” (Van'kov 2013), displaying a “nihilistic attitude” toward local traditions (Efimov 2014). As a result, conflicts that are essentially economic or social are frequently transmuted into ethnic ones. In the words of Vladimir Aksentev of the Southern Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, “Stavropol is a region with a high conflict level, and every local conflict here that involves people of different nationalities, regardless of its motives, becomes an ethnic conflict” (quoted in Larintseva 2013; see also Kolosov, Galkina, and Krindach 2001, 72).

There is no shortage of examples of cases of violence with potential ethnic undertones (see, for example, Foxall 2012, 2015, 71–88; Trufanova and Baranovskii 2012; Larintsev 2012). Tensions have been growing over access to jobs, land, and resources; local experts claim that such conflicts occur “almost every month,” although they admit it is difficult to determine whether ethnic motives are the trigger or simply add an additional layer (Tishkov 2013, 37). Local ethno-nationalists are more uncompromising, openly accusing the authorities of downplaying and glossing over the ethnic dimension in order to uphold an image of interethnic harmony.<sup>4</sup>

Two high-profile murder cases are often highlighted as “evidence” of the criminal nature (*kriminogennost'*) of the two most vilified diasporas, the Chechens and the Dargins. The first concerns the killing of Nikolai Naumenko in the city of Nevinnomyssk in Southern Stavropol in December 2012. Naumenko, an ethnic Russian, died after a fight with two Chechen brothers outside a local nightclub. The perpetrators then escaped, supposedly back to Chechnya. The case caused a local uproar, a rare example of grassroots mobilization, and has ever since been used to exemplify local transborder crime: how people from the republics can cross into the krai, commit crimes and then return home and enjoy impunity (see *Voprosy natsionalizma* 2013).

The second, the killing of a local farmer, Valerii Shrainer, epitomizes the conflict between the “indigenous” population and the “newcomers” in the eastern districts, migrants who allegedly take the law into their own hands, at the expense of the locals. Shrainer was killed in May 2012 by a Dargin shepherd in a conflict over land and pasture. In the weeks preceding the murder, Shrainer had appealed to various local authorities, including the police, but to no avail. “They ignored us,” his widow declared (*Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* 2013; Titov 2013).

The Shrainer murder thus also fits into the broader narrative of local authorities being indifferent to the plight of the ethnic Russians – and how these same authorities have been corrupted by the migrants. Local officials are accused of being in cahoots with the newcomers, being actively involved in their criminal schemes (*Situatsiya* 2013). For example, Popov has accused local officials of acting as a *krysha*, or “cover,” for the migrants in their shady businesses (*Polubota* 2012). According to ataman Yurii Churekov of the Caucasus Cossack Line, one of the founders of REKA, “We may talk about deliberate discrimination of Russians on an ethnic basis .... Most interethnic conflicts in the region are resolved by the state in favor of the guests, irrespective of who started them” (quoted in Ryazanov 2014).

What appears even more worrying is the purported “colonization” of the power structures (*silovye struktury*) by the migrants. Churekov claims these structures are not only being perverted by the migrants – staffing itself is quickly changing in ethnic composition: whereas 20 years ago the local police had been 100% ethnic Russian, this share has allegedly dropped to 50% (quoted in Ryazanov 2014). This is seen as a sellout, the surrender of ethnic Russian interests and the retreat of the Russian state. In the cultural war fought along the civilizational fault line, this former bastion of Orthodox faith and culture is now being handed over to the mountain peoples without much resistance. The logic is simple, Popov argues: Stavropol is being sacrificed to protect Moscow – if the *gortsy* are given a free hand in the krai, they will go there, and not to central Russia (quoted in Ryazanov 2014). Again, a Kosovo-like scenario is held up as the increasingly likely outcome.

### **Stavropol in federal ethno-nationalist discourse**

Local activists like Sergei Perederii, Sergei Popov, and Vladimir Nesterov have promoted narratives on Stavropol as a “buffer” or “civilizational fault-line,” but these narratives have not evolved in a vacuum. First, they fit neatly into and feed on the wider frame of *Kavkazofobiya* (Caucasus-phobia) – outspoken aversion to people from the Caucasus, an attitude that, due not least to the two gruesome wars in Chechnya, is widespread not only within Russian nationalist circles, but also among the broader public (*Vitkovskaya and Malashenko* 1999; *Foxall* 2012). Second, to win Moscow’s attention, local activists have engaged with ethno-nationalist circles at the federal level, supplying them, and the media, with arguments and “proof” of the predicaments of ethnic Russians in the krai. In this encounter with the federal-level discourse, regional narratives are adjusted so as to realign with the larger narrative of how the authorities persistently neglect the interests of the would-be titular nation.

Stavropol’s predicaments have been highlighted more than once in the nationalist press as evidence of the federal government’s “betrayal” of ethnic Russians. Writing in the Russian nationalist journal *Voprosy natsionalizma* in 2013, for example, journalist and social activist Rostislav Antonov argues that, since Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev’s terrorist raid into the city of Budennovsk in eastern Stavropol in 1995, interethnic relations in Stavropol Krai have become increasingly tense: “Migrants from the neighboring republics have practically squeezed the Russians out of the eastern districts of Stavropol

and are ever more actively penetrating also the central regions” (Antonov 2013). Mikhail Belyaev, editor of the website of the nationalist National Democratic Party has called Stavropol “an almost lost frontier”: “Russians are increasingly moving to neighboring Krasnodar Krai, while new settlers are moving into their deserted towns ... The remaining Russian settlements are swiftly being turned into enclaves on what has suddenly become alien land” (Belyaev 2012). Konstantin Krylov speaks of Stavropol being “actively colonized” by Caucasians, adding that “to live together with Caucasians according to their rules is absolutely impossible” for ethnic Russians. “The situation of the Russians in Caucasus is deteriorating, and will continue to deteriorate until the point when there is wholesale flight” (quoted in Trufanova and Baranovskii 2012).

This alarmist discourse has also gradually seeped into the mainstream media. In 2011, for example, the widely read Moscow tabloid *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* dispatched its special correspondents Aleksandr Kots and Dmitrii Steshin to Stavropol to investigate the plight of the local Russians. This resulted in the article “How Russians are Driven out of North Caucasus,” with the two reporters describing how Russians are being used as “slave labor” by Caucasian farmers (Kots and Steshin 2011a, 2011b). The article is illustrated with photos of houses up for sale. Kots and Steshin explain how notices are being put up, advising Caucasians against buying flats or houses from Russians: the Russians would be leaving anyhow, so the houses could be had for free. In the end, however, no one could be found who had actually seen such notices. The same was the case with a coffin allegedly placed in a central park in Stavropol, covered in flowers and bearing a sign: “We will cut the throats of as many Russians as there are flowers here.” Many people had heard about this – but again, it was not possible to verify the story. Perceptions matter, however, and despite the lack of concrete evidence of threats and intimidation, Kots and Steshin concluded that local Russians were voting with their feet.

The Kosovo parallel and the topic of fear-induced migration have also been picked up by other newspapers (see Karmazin 2013; Usov 2013; Ryazanov 2014). If Kots and Steshin had kept open several possible explanations why the Russians were leaving, their colleague Igor Karmazin from *Moskovskii Komsomolets* displayed fewer nuances in his report when he visited Stavropol two years later. The tenor of his message is clear from the headline: “Stavropol Is Turning into a Kosovo: Conflicts between Russians and Migrants.” Stavropol is “the most normal region in the country,” Karmazin contends, “but borders the most abnormal ones – Dagestan, Chechnya; Ingushetia is close by. There everything is abnormal: the birth rate, the crime rate, the level of federal subsidies” (Karmazin 2013). He, thus, immediately pinpoints three of the grievances frequently raised in the coverage of interethnic relations in Stavropol Krai: population growth in the neighboring republics, leading to increased migratory pressure in Stavropol; the effect of migration on crime rates in the krai; and the authorities’ continued preferential treatment of the republics – the flipside being their relative neglect of Russian-populated regions.

Karmazin’s eyewitness report includes many themes familiar from Kots and Steshin: the challenges of handling real estate, the use of Russians for slave labor, migrants threatening more or less openly to take over Russian lands and impose their (alien) cultural norms. To show the gravity of the situation, he quotes the chair of the Stavropol Krai Duma, Yurii Belyi, who warns: “We are sitting on a powder keg” (Karmazin 2013).

While some of the newspapers cited above are widely read, their impact on public discourse can in no way be compared to that of TV: most Russians today rely on television as their main source of news. In February 2013, a highly influential talk show, Arkadii Mamontov’s “Special Correspondent,” aired on the state channel *Rossiia*, featured “Project Caucasus,” a program devoted to “Why the Russians Are Leaving Stavropol” (Spetsial’nyi korrespondent 2013).<sup>6</sup> Whereas newspaper coverage had mostly been framed as a story of interethnic tensions, Mamontov’s program presented the conflict primarily in religious terms. It centered on the building of illegal mosques, the spread of radical Islam, and the fact that some girls in local elementary schools in the eastern parts of the krai wear the *hijab*. In 2012, the krai authorities had forbidden pupils to wear religious clothing in schools, but some girls defied this ban. The program showed how one of them came to school with her headgear every morning, only to be turned away. This, TV viewers were told, was a deliberate provocation on the part of the parents, who used their daughter as leverage for the Islamization of their community. Although the Kremlin

continued to insist on the official narrative of Russia having “a multi-ethnic society, but a united people” (Putin 2012), the fact that state-controlled television assisted in spreading such a “fault-line”-inspired narrative can be interpreted as an unofficial stamp of approval of the framing of Stavropol as a conflict zone, a region of actual and potential interethnic and inter-confessional strife. Whereas local ethno-nationalist activists have had success in communicating their concerns to their counterparts at the federal level, the question remains: how representative are the views expressed by organizations like REKA and the Union of Slavic Organizations? Does alarmist rhetoric about Stavropol becoming a Russian Kosovo resonate with the population at large? Are there widespread fears of the Caucasian “Other” among the krai’s ethnic Russians? And if so, do they respond by leaving Stavropol?

### **Exploring public attitudes: imminent exodus or incremental change?**

To explore public attitudes toward migrants and personal plans for migration, in September 2014 we conducted a survey in the city of Stavropol, with the assistance of the Moscow-based polling agency ROMIR. Pollsters interviewed a total of 603 people, using the face-to-face method and standard techniques for random selection. As our focus here is on the potential “exit” of ethnic Russians, in the following we omit respondents who reported another ethnic affiliation. This leaves us with 559 respondents. Of these, 28 failed to respond on the dependent variable and are therefore not included in the analysis. Thus, we operate with a sample of  $N = 531$ .

First, let us establish as a baseline for the analysis that Stavropol residents are indeed experiencing rapid ethno-demographic changes in their local community. In our survey, the vast majority, 78.2%, confirmed that the ethnic composition of their urban neighborhood had changed over the past 10 years; among these, 43.8% claimed that it had become more ethnically diverse, while 40.7% said it was in the process of becoming dominated by one particular non-Russian group. While official census data and popular assessments of the ethnic composition of the city thus diverge – according to the latest census data (2010), the city of Stavropol is 87.9% Russian – what matters here are perceptions: of the perceived size of the non-Russian population and the potential for a neighborhood takeover.

In order to address the question of individual exit, our dependent variable is whether or not the respondents harbor plans about leaving Stavropol in the near future. According to some local ethno-nationalists, “every fifth Slavic family is now sitting on their suitcases” (Vasilenkov 2012), ready to abandon the krai. While such alarmist messages might be expected from these circles, independent surveys have confirmed that Stavropol residents are ready to resettle. In a 2005 survey – even before the recent upsurge in ethno-nationalism – John O’Loughlin and colleagues found that across the *raiony* included in their Stavropol sample an average of 29.6% of the respondents wished to move within the next two years (O’Loughlin, Panin, and Witmer 2007, 260). We extended the timeframe, asking “Are you thinking of leaving Stavropol Krai within the next five years?”

As for independent variables, we wish to explore factors associated with the decision to move. While the focus is on perceived threats to culture and identity and fear-induced migration, there may be many reasons behind the decision to relocate. Ethnic Russians may be leaving because they feel threatened or “uncomfortable” where they live now, but also because they see better life-chances for themselves elsewhere. We divide the independent variables into three blocks, capturing: (1) perceived threats to culture and identity; (2) socioeconomic factors; and (3) socio-demographic predictors.

Perceived threats to the *culture and identity* of the ethnic Russian majority population are covered by four variables. First we explore the boundaries of the in-group (the collective “we”) as defined by local ethnic Russians, probing into the idea of territorial proprietorship – to whom does the krai “rightfully” belong, who are seen as the “indigenous population” (*korennoe naselenie*) of Stavropol Krai. We expect respondents who define ethnic Russians as being indigenous to be less willing to accommodate migrants and more likely to consider exit when faced with shifting ethno-demographic realities.

Second, we proceed to our respondents’ perceptions of “the Other.” Research has painted a rather bleak picture of interethnic relations in the krai. A 2013 study by the North Caucasus Federal University reported that the share of krai residents who hold that “ethnic relations are normal” dropped from 19.1%

in 2006 to 9.9% in 2012, while the percentage stating that “relations are tense and conflicts take place” rose from 17.5 to 26.9% over the same period. As many as one in five admitted to harboring personal animosity against people of another ethnic background (Tishkov 2013, 35). Asking our respondents to give an assessment of interethnic relations in Stavropol, we assume that those who perceive these as “rather bad” or “bad” would be more prone to leave than those who declare themselves content with the current state of affairs.

Third, we break up the “the Other” into locals and newcomers. For centuries, Stavropol Krai has been home to various ethnic minorities. Because we are mainly interested in the effect of non-Russian immigration from the neighboring republics, we inquire what, if any, is seen as the greatest threat associated with migrants and migration. We anticipate that those who hold that this is “interethnic and religious hostility and violence” will be more inclined to consider seeking new possibilities elsewhere.

Finally, the literature on migrantophobia stresses that if newcomers differ from the majority group in religion, this intensifies the perceived threats to culture and identity members of the majority population may experience. In a 2012 survey by the North Caucasus Federal University, Valerii Tishkov and colleagues found that Stavropol residents did not primarily experience religious tensions: 40.0% considered inter-confessional relations to be “normal”; only 8.4% felt that relations were “tense and that conflicts take place” (Tishkov 2013, 37). Nonetheless, above we noted how local ethno-nationalists framed migration in terms of a clash of civilizations between the Orthodox and Muslim worlds. Therefore, we included a question on whether our respondents agree with the assertion that “Islam is turning into a threat to social stability and Russian culture” – expecting those who strongly support this to be more likely to contemplate the “exit” option.

Recognizing that the decision to leave may also be driven by the pocketbook and cost-benefit analyses about lifetime earnings, in the second block we control for *socioeconomic* factors. This block consists of four variables representing push/pull factors that may affect the decision to relocate. Two variables cover material conditions: the income level of the respondent’s household,<sup>7</sup> and an assessment of whether household economic conditions have worsened over the last 12 months. We assume that those who report low income and/or worsening economic conditions may be more likely to consider moving than those who are relatively well off or who experience a stable or positive development in their living conditions. We also ask whether the respondent has employment, expecting those currently not in paid jobs to be more inclined to consider relocating. Finally, assuming that the student population is more mobile than the average citizen, we single out from those not working the respondents who are still pursuing their studies.

The third block consists of standard *socio-demographic* predictors: age, gender, marital status, and level of education.<sup>8</sup> The decision to move may be influenced by life cycle characteristics and social attachments: younger people are more likely to move than older ones, males more than females, single more than married, and the better educated more than the less educated (see O’Loughlin, Panin, and Witmer 2007, 258).

What did we find? First, there is hardly any evidence of an imminent exodus of ethnic Russians from Stavropol. Surprisingly few respondents – only 11.7% – declared that they were contemplating the “exit” option.

As to the independent variables, our respondents confirm the impression of interethnic relations in the krai as being tense: 58.2% responded that ethnic Russians constitute the indigenous population of the krai; 26.6% opined that interethnic relations are currently “rather bad” or “bad”; 21.2% associated migrants with “interethnic and religious hostility and violence”;<sup>9</sup> and a whopping 59.7% viewed Islam as a threat to social stability and local culture. The latter result appears to reverse the order of the magnitude of perceived threats stemming from interethnic versus inter-confessional divisions as identified by Tishkov and colleagues, with our respondents giving far more negative appraisals of the role of Islam.

Examining the bivariate relations between having plans for relocating and variables capturing perceived threats to the culture and identity of the Russian majority population, we find a strong and positive correlation with the first three (see Table 2).<sup>10</sup> Whereas fewer Stavropol residents than perhaps expected express intentions of leaving the krai, those already “sitting on their suitcases” are nevertheless

influenced by fears of the ethnic “Other” and the deterioration of interethnic relations. However, the fourth variable – attitudes toward Islam – fails to serve as a predictor for plans to leave: the level of anti-Islamic sentiments is equally strong among those who intend to stay.

Turning to the socioeconomic control variables, we find little support for our initial assumptions related to material conditions. The income variable does not produce significant results: neither low income nor subjective assessment of worsening household economic conditions over the past 12 months is associated with greater likelihood of planning to leave. The employment variables yielded mixed results. Not having a paid job was not a predictor – probably because very few of those who answered that they were not working were actually unemployed (1.6%); most of these respondents were retirees (70.9%). However, those outside the workforce because they were studying were clearly more likely to consider relocating within a five-year timeframe.

Finally, examining the third block – socio-demographic variables – we find that both age and marital status are significant predictors in the model: the young and single are much more likely to be planning a life elsewhere. Gender is not significant, however. With respect to the last socio-demographic variable – education level – we find that respondents who have completed only secondary education or less are more likely to think of moving, whereas for the other categories, education level no longer serves as a predictor.

To gauge how the variables of the three blocks co-vary, and to see the direct effect of these on the dependent variable – that is, on plans for leaving Stavropol within the next five years – we performed

**Table 2.** Association between predictors and expectations of moving within five years ( $N = 531$ ).

	Bivariate analysis			Multivariate analysis		
	OR	95%CI	P	OR	95%CI	P
<i>Block 1: Threats to culture and identity</i>						
Russians as indigenous population: (no as reference)	1.81	1.00–3.27	0.05	1.74	0.87–3.47	0.12
Interethnic relations (good as reference)	3.29	1.89–5.72	<0.001	2.41	1.13–5.13	0.02
Migrants cause hostility and violence (no as reference)	2.15	1.18–3.89	0.01	1.02	0.44–2.35	0.97
Islam a threat (no as reference)	0.98	0.56–1.71	0.98			
<i>Block 2: Socio-economic factors</i>						
Income level (high as reference)						
Low	1.93	0.51–7.34	0.33			
Medium	1.21	0.41–3.56	0.73			
Economic situation worse (no as reference)	0.97	0.54–1.76	0.93			
Working (no as reference)	1.26	0.73–2.16	0.41			
In education (no as reference)	13.30	6.19–28.54	<0.001	1.56	0.52–4.71	0.43
<i>Block 3: Socio-demographic factors</i>						
Age (high as reference)	8.52	4.60–15.77	<0.001	4.49	2.07–9.71	<0.001
Gender (woman as reference)	1.11	0.65–1.89	0.70			
Marital status (married as reference)	2.99	1.73–5.15	<0.001	1.38	0.64–3.00	0.41
Level of formal education (high as reference)						
Low	6.92	2.41–19.90	<0.001	3.26	0.80–13.23	0.10
Medium	1.03	0.56–1.88	0.94	1.07	0.49–2.31	0.87

Note: OR = odds ratio; 95% CI = 95% confidence intervals;  $P = p$ -value.

a multivariate logistic regression. All variables that yielded a  $p$ -value below 0.10 in the bivariate analysis are included in this next step.

The regression analysis reveals that a negative assessment of migrants, which in the bivariate analysis emerged as a fairly strong predictor, now loses its power to forecast whether a respondent is likely to consider leaving Stavropol. Russian “proprietorship” of the krai (Russians as indigenous population) is also no longer significant. Of the variables that capture the impact of perceived threats to Russian culture and identity, only a negative assessment of interethnic relations per se (without explicit reference to migrants) remains as a strong and significant predictor.

Of the socioeconomic control variables, still pursuing studies (“being in education”), the single strongest predictor in the bivariate analysis, now fails to yield significant results. Thus, none of the socioeconomic variables included in the model can help us predict whether a respondent is likely to leave. Likewise, in the third block, marital status and education level lose their power to predict migration. What matters concerning plans for relocating within the next five years appears to be age, which emerges as the strongest predictor for harboring intentions of leaving the krai.

How to interpret these findings? As the age variable seems to have wiped out several other bivariate associations, we performed a sub-analysis of age and the independent variables with the highest odds ratios (OR) in the bivariate analysis that are no longer significant predictors (support for the statement that migrants cause interethnic and religious hostility and violence; being in education; marital status; level of education). A chi-square test of the bivariate associations between low age and the selected independent variables reveals that, indeed, young respondents (aged 30 or less) are more likely to: (a) associate migrants with hostility and violence; (b) include all respondents who state that they are currently in education; (c) include a higher share of those not married; and (d) have a smaller share of people with lower education (completed secondary education or less) (all  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, much of the predictive power of these variables in the original bivariate analysis can be explained by age as a confounding factor.

Interethnic relations emerge as the only other significant predictor in the multivariate analysis. In their 2005 survey, O’Loughlin and colleagues found that, contrary to expectations, respondents who reported that interethnic relations were poor were not more likely to express a desire to move in the future. In their logit model, they identified four significant predictors: age, marital status, occupational rank, and whether the respondent saw the lack of economic development as the main danger facing the region (O’Loughlin, Panin, and Witmer 2007, 262). According to our 2014 survey, however, economic push and pull appears less central to deliberations over whether to relocate, whereas the interethnic relations variable holds its ground in the regression analysis.

There may be several reasons for this. In a situation with the Russian economy teetering on the brink of recession, the economic pull may have weakened as compared to 2005. In terms of GRP per capita, Stavropol was still lagging far behind the national average; between O’Loughlin and colleagues’ survey (2005) and our own (2014), the situation had just slightly improved, from 42.5% of the national average to 47.7%.<sup>11</sup> However, these figures mask the fact that due to climatic conditions, living standards are higher in the Russian South than in much of the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East: in 2014, Stavropol ranked 18 out of 83 federal subjects in terms of living standards (RIA Novosti 2016). Factors such as the greater economic uncertainty in Russia as a whole, the relative improvement of living standards in Stavropol, and local embeddedness may all reduce the attractiveness of economic pull.

At the same time, the increasingly alarmist Russian ethno-nationalist rhetoric in the intervening period may have contributed to whipping up migrantophobia. The role of national TV channels in inflaming fear and prejudice toward migrants during the years immediately preceding our survey is well documented (Tolz and Harding 2015). At the local level, this is manifested in perceptions of rapid neighborhood takeover. Finally, our findings should also be seen in the wider context of a post-Soviet generational shift in how Russians relate to ethnic minorities. Several studies have shown that young Russians are more likely to espouse xenophobic attitudes (see, for example, Sokolov 2013). What is certain is that, when we control for the other variables in the model, the respondents who say they intend to leave are clearly more likely to hold a negative view of interethnic relations in the

krai. Our results contradict ethno-nationalist allegations of Stavropol being in the process of turning into a “Russian Kosovo,” but individual exit may still be driven by fears of imminent destabilization of interethnic relations.

### Concluding remarks

Even if the share of ethnic Russians in Stavropol is declining, demographic trends do not indicate an exodus of alarming proportions. Whereas the percentage of those identifying as ethnic Russians had dropped from 91.3% in 1959 to 80.1% in 2010, in absolute numbers there has in fact been a slight increase over the last 25 years: from 2.19 million in 1989 to 2.23 million in 2010. As we have stressed, however, with migrantophobia, perceptions are fundamental. Despite their continued political, cultural, and demographic dominance in Stavropol, many Russians perceive the Russian ethnos as being under attack, “an embattled minority and second-class citizens” (Foxall 2015, 2). According to Markedonov,

No other Russian region has changed its image so radically in such a short time as Stavropol. Until 1991, Stavropol became a newsmaker solely in connection with yet another victory in the never-ending “battle for the harvest”.... After 1991, the once stable region suddenly turned into an outpost of the state. What is more, into a restless, battling outpost at the border between the Russian and Caucasian worlds. (Markedonov 2007)

At the 2013 founding conference of the Congress of Slavs of Stavropol, the prolific nationalist author Aleksandr Sevast’yanov, member of a Moscow delegation attending the Congress, went on record as claiming Stavropol had turned into “the frontline in an invisible ethnic war, the Russians’ war for survival” (Sevast’yanov 2013b). Our survey data indicate that such a war was largely invisible also to those on this alleged frontline. One in 10 ethnic Russians in Stavropol is considering leaving the region within the next five years, but that is better explained by life cycle characteristics than migration from the neighboring republics.

While local activists through “collective voice” managed to put Stavropol onto the national ethno-nationalist agenda, they have apparently failed to mobilize the local population. Although Stavropol residents report rapid ethno-demographic changes and deteriorating interethnic relations, few ethnic Russians seem to be considering “individual exit.” If census data and official statistics give a sufficiently accurate picture, Stavropol Krai is certainly not on the verge of becoming a “Russian Kosovo.”

### Notes

1. Authors’ interviews with nationalist leaders Aleksandr Belov (Potkin) and Vladimir Tor, Moscow, October 2013.
2. We draw on a media survey of the regional press, fieldwork, and in-depth interviews in Stavropol Krai in June 2014 with local politicians, government officials, experts from media and academia, and activists, as well as a survey among Stavropol residents in September 2014.
3. This idea was also expressed repeatedly in interviews with local politicians, activists, and academics during our fieldwork in Stavropol and Pyatigorsk in June 2014.
4. The official line of the krai authorities is still one of “multinationalism,” “ethnic harmony,” and a “unique historical experience of coexistence” (see Pavlova 2012).
5. In federal ethno-nationalist discourse, this grievance has been expressed through the “Stop feeding the Caucasus” campaign (*Khvatit kormit’ Kavkaz*), fronted by, among others, Alexei Navalny.
6. A few weeks earlier, a shorter version of the report had been aired on *Rossiia’s* flagship news program, “Vesti nedeli,” with Dmitrii Kiselev as anchor (Vesti.ru 2012). Kiselev later claimed that it was his program that had launched the topic of North Caucasian migration to Stavropol as a federal concern (Tolz and Harding 2015, 473).
7. The “income per person in household” variable is recoded into three categories: low = below 5000 rubles per person per month; medium = from 5000 to 15,000; and high = above 15,000.
8. Age is recoded into low = 18–30 years old; and high = older than 30. The level of education variable is recoded into low = completed secondary education or less; medium = having incomplete higher education; and high = graduated from higher education institution.
9. The single biggest group of respondents nevertheless reported that “Migration does not constitute a threat” (44.4%).
10. The level of statistically significant relationships was set to 0.05 in all analyses.
11. Calculated based on data from Rosstat ([https://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat\\_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/accounts/#](https://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/accounts/#)).



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