Experiencing Church Asylum:

The Experience of Russian Conscientious Objectors Seeking Asylum

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1 Executive Summary

This report examines the experiences of Russian men who refused to serve in the war against Ukraine and sought protection in Germany by taking refuge in churches. For many of these men, church asylum in Germany became a last resort to ensure their safety and dignity amid restrictive asylum laws and the Dublin Regulation.

The study is based on four semi-structured interviews: two with asylum seekers who stayed in church asylum, one with a hosting pastor and one with an NGO worker. The findings reveal that the asylum seekers faced complex bureaucratic procedures, prolonged uncertainty and emotional exhaustion. One of the most distressing factors was the unpredictability of asylum outcomes, generating constant anxiety about deportation. By contrast, church asylum provided a secure and supportive environment that improved their well-being and offered psychological relief from the instability of refugee camps.

The process of providing church asylum suffers from limited access to legal aid and a reliance on personal networks to arrange placements. From the churches' perspective, the most significant challenge was not financial, but rather the shortage of human resources required to manage the substantial bureaucratic and domestic labour involved in hosting refugees.

The report presents the background and rationale of the study, its methodology, and its results, before providing a conclusion and recommendations.

2 Background

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has reshaped the global security landscape and brought critical issues of military recruitment in Russia to the forefront. As the conflict has continued, the Russian government has struggled to maintain its military strength and has resorted to various strategies to reinforce its armed forces. These measures include offering incentives for voluntary enlistment, forced conscription, and the deployment of officers through intimidation and manipulation. Other violent practices include the recruitment of prisoners and the targeting of marginalised and subaltern populations. Concurrently, notable resistance to military recruitment has emerged, encompassing draft evasion, desertion, individuals hiding within the country or fleeing abroad, public protests, and escalating war fatigue among the population.

According to the statistics provided by the receiving countries, most of all to neighbouring countries that do not require visas for Russian citizens, such as Georgia (60,000), Armenia (42,000), Kazakhstan (146,000) and Turkey (78,998)[1]. According to surveys conducted in 2022, more than half of respondents (58%) depended on the visa regime for Russian passport holders and social connections in the country [2] (Kamalov et al., 2022).

There is no exact number of share draft evaders and deserters among them. However, the same logic applies: most of them chose Armenia and Kazakhstan as their

[1]Zavadskaya, M. (2023). The War-Induced Exodus from Russia A Security Problem or A Convenient Political Bogey? FIIA Briefing Paper №358. Retrieved from $https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/bp358\_margarita\_war-induced-exodus-from-russia.pdf$

[2]Kamalov, E., Sergeeva, I., Zavadskaya, M., & Kostenko, V. (2022) Big exodus: A portrait of new migrants from Russia. Report on the first wave of the online survey. OutRush, April 2022. Retrieved from $https://outrush.io/report\_mar022$

first destination countries to escape Russia due to their relaxed migration policies[3]. According to various estimates, there are around 1,000 deserters in Armenia and other host countries, including Kazakhstan.

Nevertheless, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Georgia are not considered safe for conscientious objectors due to their unstable political regimes, fluctuating relationships with Russia and, the presence of Russian military units. That's why the final destination countries have always been EU countries, specifically Germany.

Although EU politicians have publicly expressed support for deserters and draft evaders from Russia, only a few cases have been recorded of asylum seeker or refugee status being granted to the 349 men who are eligible for military service in Russia[4]. However, the main problem for deserters who have criminal charges against them in Russia, is to get to the EU. Even if they successfully escape to Armenia or Kazakhstan, the criminal charges prevent them from receiving a Russian travel passport or leaving the host country, as Russia has information-sharing agreements with both countries regarding crimes being prepared or committed, and the individuals involved[5]. They find themselves in a highly precarious situation.

In October 2024, six deserters were granted travel documents by France to flee to the EU. Others obtained Russian travel passports and reached the EU independently. Regardless of their route, they are now all navigating the process of applying for asylum or protection status in their chosen EU countries. In the case of Germany, due to the Dublin Regulation, it is impossible to apply for asylum if an asylum-seeker enters the EU via a third country. As it is necessary to have a Schengen or transit visa to enter Germany by air, many deserters arrive on foot through third countries and circumvent the Dublin regulation by seeking asylum in a church[6].

As Figure 1 shows, the number of people admitted to Church asylum varies by federal state, reflecting both the varying demand for Church asylum in different regions and the different capacities of churches to provide asylum. Clearly, since 2016 and the drop during the 2020 pandemic, placements in Church Asylum in Nordrhein-Westfalen have increased radically, with a steady increase also seen in Bayern and Hessen.

3 Purpose

The series of interviews was conducted to document and explore the experience of contentious objectors from Russia seeking humanitarian protection in Germany during their temporary stay in a church asylum in Germany. The conjunction of this experience with their overall life trajectory is examined.

[3]These countries do not require travel passport to enter.

[4]Thorsten Knuf und Christian Unger. Flucht vor Putins Krieg: Russen haben kaum Chancen auf Asyl. 13.05.2025. Retrieved from $https://www.morgenpost.de/politik/article409009506/flucht-vor-putins-krieg-russen-haben-kaum-chancen-auf-asyl.html$

[5]Overall, since the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, there have been over 10 000 court decisions for desertion and similar charges.

[6]*Asyl in der Kirche* is a social practice then local churches temporary accommodate asylum seekers to provide a protection from the deportation and grant a chance for them to get their asylum case to be considered in Germany.

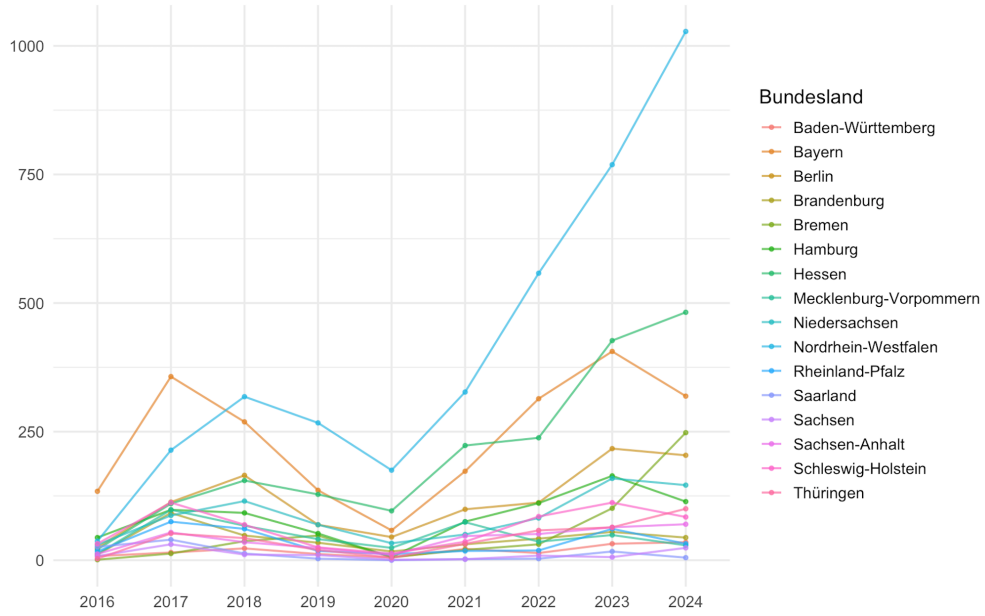

Figure 1: Number of people admitted to Church Aslylum by Bundesland, 2016 – 2024.
Source: Die Ökumenische Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Asyl in der Kirche e.V.

4 Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two asylum seekers who had lived in a church asylum, as well as with two people who had facilitated this process. The asylum seekers were asked about their decision to flee Russia, their journey to Germany and their experiences of navigating the bureaucratic complexities involved in applying for asylum and living in multiple homes. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a member of the hosting church and an NGO worker who supported the asylum seekers during their time in Germany. All the interviews were conducted between August and September. At the time, the conscientious objectors had been staying in Germany for slightly less than a year.

The table 1 summarises the interviews. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

	Pseudonym	Role
1	Nick	Asylum seeker
2	Aizek	Asylum seeker
3	Pastor Hans	Pastor of the Evangelical Church
4	Otto	NGO worker

Table 1: Interviewee list

5 Results

5.1 Getting there

Both asylum seekers that we interviewed had travelled to Germany in a similar way. They escaped Russia via third countries such as Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan, which took some time. As entry to EU countries requires a visa, many asylum seekers had no choice but to cross the EU border on foot. Most of them felt relieved after entering the EU and applying for asylum. By this point, they had gained experience in navigating the complex rules of migration and had become part of networks of solidarity within Russian communities of conscientious objectors, as well as activist networks that support conscientious objectors seeking asylum. These communities facilitated their migration by constantly informing them about border controls and customs and life in the refugee camp. They also had some knowledge of the potential outcomes of their asylum cases and had an action plan that included the possibility of seeking Church asylum. This awareness, coupled with their reliance on these supportive communities, enabled our informants to develop the resilience required to overcome the initial stages of filing an asylum application, undergoing the Dublin interview, and being placed in a refugee camp.

Nevertheless, their general awareness of asylum-seeking procedures did not protect them from the disadvantages of the process. The first such moment, and the most emotionally significant, occurred during the Dublin interview, their first official encounter with the asylum authorities. For the first time since arriving in the EU, they were confronted with unexpected developments and uncertainty – they were informed that the asylum process involves many stages of interviews, but were not aware of the specifics of each stage. For example, they were not aware that the first 'Dublin' interview is strictly devoted to the logistics of how the asylum seeker got to the destination country where they filed the asylum application. This complicated the preparation process for such an interview.

As a result, our interviewee experienced a rapid emotional shift, going from the relief and excitement of reaching a safe country to apathy. Unfortunately, this would happen regularly as they proceeded with their asylum-seeking journey. In the following interview, the informant explains that, although he was aware of what to expect shortly after arrival — the interview and the denial of the application based on the Dublin Regulation — he had hoped that things would be different due to the sensitive nature of his case:

> *"After two weeks, we were scheduled for an interview. I arrived with my case documents: letters of recommendation from organisations, my autobiography, all my military documents. I came and they started asking only about the journey. Here is my case. I am deserting. We do not need that. We're just looking at if you have Dublin or not. And what country is responsible for you. That's when I stopped looking through rose-tinted glasses. I took them off".* Aizek.

From the moment they fled Russia until they arrived at the EU border in the hope of receiving asylum or humanitarian protection, conscientious objectors had to endure the struggles of migrating to foreign countries. They experienced uncertainty regarding their migration status, their own security and the safety of their loved ones in Russia. They also had to make a living and get to an EU country without the

appropriate documents or funds. Despite established support networks in Russia and host countries, as well as information dissemination on the process, upon arrival they have to cope with hostile living conditions in refugee camps, as well as uncertainty and indefinite waiting periods.

5.2 Bureaucratic encounters

Although German bureaucracy is very complex and difficult to navigate, it becomes easier with the help of mediators and explainers, as well as knowledge of comparable lived experiences. The main problems in this area were: 1) uncertain waiting times for decisions on deportation and change of status 2) uncertain outcomes 3) language barriers 4) limited access to legal support 5) restrictions on employment and mobility

The time-consuming nature of bureaucratic processes created the biggest obstacle, resulting in long waits for decisions from the authorities that determined one's chances of staying in the country, as well as urgent situations requiring immediate action, usually necessitating collaboration between lawyers, hosting churches, and activists assisting asylum seekers.

Even under conditions of a certain predictability of asylum-seeking procedures, uncertainty regarding waiting times and an unfamiliar bureaucratic system contributed to overall anxiety and feelings of frustration and injustice. Limited access to legal assistance and information on procedures in an unfamiliar legal system, coupled with an inability to communicate in English or German, made matters worse:

> *"It's just that you're constantly being bombarded with paperwork, and you're under a lot of stress because there's a chance you'll be deported, and you will be deported. That doesn't make you feel any better. Especially when you go to bed, because they come in the morning. You know they can come at 5 or 4 am in the morning".* Nick.

In the following extract, one of our informants explains that he sometimes felt so abandoned and anxious that he regretted his decision to file for asylum in Germany instead of staying in Russia and getting imprisoned[7]:

> *"Then they told me (the migration authorities) that we would contact you later. And you will come then to get your documents. We need to clarify a few things then. That's all. I was on pins and needles for a week. I wish I hadn't left. I wish I had served my time. But when things are bad, I always have these thoughts. I wish I had served my time".* Aizek.

However, over time, as familiarity with the bureaucratic system increased and German proficiency improved, overall anxiety declined and confidence in one's own status in the country rose:

> *"This is a different kind of waiting. It's a calmer kind of waiting, knowing that Dublin will end, and that's it. And then you'll start a new phase".* Aizek.

[7]For this conscientious objector the distress of being away from his family and kids contributed to the overall degradation of mental health.

5.3 Being safe and accessing care

Once placed in a refugee camp, our informants had to cope with the threat of physical violence, which contributed to their overall feeling of being defenceless and unable to organise their everyday lives. These feelings were most intense in the refugee camp and the Heim, and were accompanied by the overall feeling of being *forgotten*:

> *"At first, I was very happy to be in Germany because, well, I thought that I... Okay, anyway, I was happy to be in Germany. But then, I started to have some negative impressions just from living in the camp, because it was really rough there. There were a lot of people, neighbours in the rooms and upstairs, and there were constant fights, even stabbings".* Nick.

> *"Live here quietly, without drawing attention to yourselves, as you wish. With cockroaches and everything, and everything, they forgot about us. Until we receive official status, we are nobody".* Aizek.

In comparison to those conditions, the environment of the church asylum was described as ideal. The overall feeling of physical safety had a positive impact on overall well-being and the ability to cope with the challenging circumstances of asylum-seeking procedures. At this point, both of our informants would have gained the strength to study or work. One of them found a remote job in their previous occupation, while the other spent time studying, making music, and interacting with the church community more. The only downside to staying in a church asylum, as mentioned by both of our informants, was the feeling of being in limbo, enduring it and feeling guilty for being an obstruction to the church:

> *"The only thing that was difficult emotionally was that six months of my life were just going nowhere. That it was just waiting for Dublin. But otherwise, everything was perfect. In terms of food, they constantly provided for us; every week we ordered groceries for the week. They brought us everything we ordered. The room was nice, large, cosy, clean. They didn't deprive us of anything. On the contrary, they always supported us, always. In general, it was very good there. I constantly offered them help, but for some reason they refused. I don't know why".* Aizek.

5.4 The labour of hosting an asylum seeker

5.4.1 A church perspective

Hosting a refugee involves providing shelter and creating an environment in which they can feel at home. It is also a bureaucratic burden. In an interview about hosting conscientious objectors, a pastor Hans shared that the bureaucratic struggles of the asylum-seeking process are also passed on to the hosting church. This is especially true when it comes to managing the bureaucratic errands in a timely manner. Despite mentioning the financial issues involved in accommodating people, a shortage of manpower to provide care for asylum seekers turned out to be the main issue for hosts, who are responsible for providing social and legal advice, language classes and socialisation:

> *"I think the main problem is that there is quite a lot of work to be done that has to be done in one or two days. So, it has, yeah, and there is not much*

time. ¡. . . ¿ The problem was a little bit, we hoped that this church asylum would help us, and three congregations to come closer to each other as well at the same time with this work, and that didn't really happen. So, we had the persons in our church center, so we were the people who were busy with them, and in the specific situation of our congregation, we haven't been ready to take people in the same way as we had been ready eight years ago. And some of the people who supported us in the church asylum now are quite old and are not anymore able to do anything in that". Pastor Hans

Another issue is how refugees are distributed between church asylums. As personal connections are the main method of finding a place, asylum seekers may have to travel long distances from their place of residence to reach an asylum. It also becomes difficult for the church pastor to justify taking in a particular asylum seeker. On the other hand, finding a place in a church asylum can be difficult, as parishes in the Baden-Württemberg region tend to reject requests. As a result, finding a place in a church asylum becomes a matter of luck and only works through tight personal connections:

"No, we had three deserters who wanted to go to church asylum, but it was not easy to find a church to host them. So then we found a place for two, but the church said, sorry, we cannot take more. ¡. . . ¿ all of the churches we asked here, they said, yeah, in general, we had one and we could, but it's not the best time for us. We have not space in the moment. We don't have enough people to support and so on. ¡. . . ¿ I really see is that it's not so easy to take someone (in the Church Asylum). You are responsible for them. They are there 24 hours. Yeah. And then it's clear the church must have a separate room". Otto.

Another problem is the limited number of lawyers who take on asylum cases. This means that the available legal professionals are overworked and unable to give each applicant much attention. The head of an NGO that helps asylum seekers apply for asylum in Germany describes the situation as follows:

"The problem, I would say, is to have lawyers who are willing to take asylum cases. Because all of the asylum cases, lawyer will not get money from the people. So they are officially the so-called Pflichtverteidiger. So in Germany, the system say, if you have not enough money, the government will pay it. But the amount of money what government pays a lawyer is much less as normally lawyer get if they do it directly. So you need a lawyer who is motivated for that". Otto.

As we could see from the interview, under these circumstances, miscommunication is quite an easy result: asylum seekers feel left out due to a lack of understanding of the rules of communication with their lawyer — for example, sending all documents and requests from the authorities to the lawyer immediately, and lawyers being overworked and not always having the resources to inform their clients.

6 Conclusion

This study has shown that seeking refuge through church asylum provides a much-needed safe space and sense of dignity amid bureaucratic uncertainty and precarious

living conditions. For asylum seekers, church asylum provides physical protection from deportation and serves as a psychological and emotional sanctuary where they can regain a sense of agency and belonging. Furthermore, uncertainty surrounding the outcome of asylum cases is one of the most distressing aspects of the process. Prolonged waiting times, limited communication from the authorities and unpredictable legal decisions cause chronic anxiety among asylum seekers, which often undermines their sense of security. However, reliance on external legal and social support helps asylum seekers overcome this.

At the same time, the process reveals the systemic limitations of the church asylum system in Germany and the uneven distribution of responsibilities among churches. While financial constraints are significant, interview data suggest that a lack of human resources, such as volunteers, social workers and pastoral staff, is an even more critical issue. The emotional and logistical labour required to support asylum seekers through lengthy bureaucratic procedures often exceeds the capacity of small church communities, thereby limiting the number of people they can help. Insufficient legal support, a shortage of hosting congregations and reliance on personal networks to secure a place in church asylum expose the fragility of this humanitarian mechanism.

Despite these challenges, cooperation between churches, NGOs and individual activists is vital in order to sustain protection for conscientious objectors and other asylum seekers in need. Many churches still choose to provide church asylum for various reasons, including taking a political stance against rigid asylum policies and religious and humanitarian motivations.

7 Recommendations

[for authorities]

1. **Amend policies regarding the recognition of the right to conscientious objection to military service**

    - Demonstrate an overall commitment to the human right to conscientious objection, especially in times of war and increased militarisation.
    - Recognise conscientious objection as grounds for asylum.
    - Secure residence status for conscientious objectors from war zones.
    - Decriminalise conscientious objectors from other countries and activists and human rights defenders who support them.

    [for churches and NGOs]

2. **Mobilise church involvement in supporting conscientious objectors**

    - Support conscientious objectors in a way that is appropriate to respective community (e.g. church asylum).
    - Campaign to end the criminalisation of church asylum.
    - Support and facilitate counselling and other forms of social support for conscientious objectors, also through peace education and community integration.

3. **Increase Coordination Among Churches and NGOs**

- Set up a coordination platform to match asylum seekers with available church spaces before they arrive in Germany.
- Encourage inter-parish cooperation to systematise hosting arrangements, where several congregations share financial and logistical responsibilities, and develop organisational frameworks for such cooperation.
- Create a space for regular communication (meetings, workshops, etc.) between NGOs, churches, and lawyers, to share best practice and address systemic challenges in providing church asylum.

4. **Strengthen Human Resource Capacity**

   - Recruit and train volunteers from different congregations and NGOs to support asylum seekers with translation, legal assistance and daily logistics.
   - Provide structured training on asylum procedures, trauma-informed care and intercultural communication for church staff and volunteers, encouraging churches to provide asylum.

5. **Legal support and communication**

   - Develop and translate clear communication guidelines for asylum seekers to reduce misunderstandings when cooperating with their lawyers in Germany and with state authorities.

6. **Mitigate Uncertainty and Emotional Distress**

   - Ensure regular communication and check-ins about case progress, even if there are no updates, to reduce anxiety and feelings of abandonment.
   - Provide orientation booklets to help asylum seekers understand the stages of the asylum process, realistic timelines, and potential drawbacks.

About the Author

Anna Mariia Filippova is an independent researcher and sociologist, who studied at the University of Potsdam and University College Dublin. She has worked on projects investigating the lived experiences of conscientious objectors in Russia and exploring ways to support them. She collaborates with international academic and peacebuilding organisations that work in the field of peace and security.

About the Study

This study was commissioned by the Working Group for Peace Education (afpb) with the support of the Peace Fund of the Evangelical Regional Church of Baden. It documents the experience of a church asylum for Russian deserters who fled the war in Ukraine and reached Germany via the Caucasus and the Balkans.
Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Afpb e.V. has been supporting Russian and Ukrainian conscientious objectors, deserters and peace activists who travel via Georgia or Armenia. Online and face-to-face counselling is provided on residence rights, onward travel to safe countries and the asylum procedure in Europe.
In the summer of 2024 several Russian deserters arrived in Germany and received support in their asylum proceedings. According to the Dublin Regulation, they were to be transferred to Croatia, where in practice no asylum procedure was available to them. With the support of a Protestant church community in Baden and the Quakers (Religious Society of Friends), church asylum was organised for two deserters. After almost six months the departure order was lifted and their asylum applications were accepted in Germany. One of them has since been granted refugee status; others are appealing their rejections with legal assistance.

afpb e.V.

The "Working Group on Peace Policy Education" e.V. (afpb) was founded in 1977 and has been advocating for increased peace education in society and schools. They are active in network for peace education in Baden-Württemberg and involved in the Service Point for Peace Education with the Ministry of Education. They offer seminars on peace education subjects and assesments.

Counselling Conscientious Objectors

Afpb is part of the campaign advocating for the right to asylum for conscientious objectors and provide support who refuse military service, both in Germany and particularly in the South Caucasus. They assist young people who are fleeing the war in Ukraine through the Caucasus with regular online consultations, a hotline, and for visa applications.

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