Broken cargo: smuggling, networks, and Russian identity

Ben Johnson

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Ukraine's 110th Marko Bezruchko Brigade's RM-70 firing

Ben Johnson -Less than a week away from the one-year anniversary of the Ukraine War, many Russians are still seeking to escape their country. Individuals ranging from those supporting Ukraine to men avoiding the draft have turned to several complex networks of smugglers to escape. Often harrowing journeys, these getaways raise questions about Russian identity and the strengths and limitations of Russian propaganda.

Organizations working to rescue anti-war dissents can be understood using the concept of networks. A network refers to a collection of nodes, each with a different task, connected to perform a greater purpose. In this case, these networks are quite complex. Comprised of drivers, safe-house operators, and logisticians, to name a few, these networks span thousands of miles, often crossing multiple territories. For example, one such network, In Transit, is based out of Berlin but has operations and nodes throughout Russia, Germany, and Kazakhstan, among others. Most of these nodes will never come into contact with each other, yet they can still contribute to the overarching function. Indeed, nodes don't always require a physical location but can be comprised of several actors working together in a virtual space. This raises further an important and powerful aspect of networks. If one node is compromised, it typically doesn't bring down the entire network. Should Russian police discover a driver, strict anonymity between actors assists in protecting other nodes from detection.

While Russian T.V. and news outlets continue to present an image of Russian solidarity, another example of a network, the existence of these smuggling operations and the increasing number of people utilizing them, point to a fracturing of Russian identity. National identity describes how one views or attaches to a particular place, in this case, a nation. This identity is specific to each individual and can be strengthened and weakened. For some, the war in Ukraine has strengthened their national identity as Russians, but for others, their sense of attachment has weakened.

Image source: 110th General Marko Bezruchko Mechanized Brigade Link:

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