

A scholarly journal and news magazine. June 2026. Vol. XIX:2.
From the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEES), Södertörn University.

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CBEEES Annual 2026

BALTIC WORLDS

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RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY
UNDER REPRESSION

Adapting, but not surrendering

special issue

EVERYDAY RESISTANCE / ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM / ANTI-WAR MOVEMENTS / DIGITAL FEMINISM



Illustration: Kain Zarić-Sunvisson

editorial

The Russian activist: A chameleon

Activism exists in Russia today – this much is clear when one reads the contributions to this Special Issue on “Civic activism in Russia”. Although activists have been forced to adapt, and although their resistance is sometimes very subtle, Russian activism is far from dead. Guest editor Ekaterina Kalinina has invited a range of researchers, many of whom contribute anonymously for safety reasons, who together offer insights into the different shades of activism occurring in different areas of society and unveil the hidden ongoing resistance that boils under the surface. As for instance, in the essay of anonymous authors, based on in-depth interviews with practicing teachers from different areas of Russia showing that the teachers’ resistance remains intentionally nonpublic, carefully calibrated to avoid escalation. The essay takes the telling quote “We comply, but do not obey” as its title.

MANY NGO:S have been marked as foreign agents and forced to shut down. This situation had been escalating since 2022. Researcher Svetlana Erpyleva has conducted in-depth interviews with Russian activists on how they have adapted their climate activism strategies before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Many activists, due to fear of repression, have exited the movement, she finds; but as she argues in her peer-reviewed article, they have not quit activism altogether – they simply refocused.

Several articles in this issue show how subtle and intuitive activists must be in judging how much space they have or can take for action, and the range of means used to navigate activism and express resistance. At the same time, there is a fine line between adapting and becoming a bearer of the structure and system one is against, which presents the activists with constant ethical dilemmas that must be balanced with security issues.

Ekaterina Kalinina begins her peer-reviewed article with a question: Why are people continuing to engage in civic and political activism in Russia,

despite increasing personal risks in the years following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Many do so because they still think they can perform meaningful work even if they have to present it in more depoliticized light. Among the reasons for continuing to engage with activism, the interviewees also stress personal choices based on their emotions and inner compasses. The activists wanted to stay true to their core values of humanism: a complete suspension of their efforts would cause an identity crisis, as they would risk losing who they imagine themselves to be. At the same time, although driven by emotions and pathos, the activists need to stay low and blend in if they are to avoid repression. They are forced to become chameleons.

GUEST EDITOR Ekaterina Kalinina gives a more detailed presentation of all articles in her introduction, and in their final essay, her co-editor Oliver Skye, together with Elisa Marin reflect on the terms for researchers studying Russia today.

As this issue’s findings are in many regards ground-breaking we have invited Nadezda Petrusenko to comment it. In her afterword she reflects on the pioneering results, the diversity of activism, and looks for any signs for possibilities of future mass mobilization. ✖

Ninna Mörner

in this issue



Civic engagement in Russia

“ In March 2022, the Russian government introduced a suite of repressive laws that effectively outlawed most forms of public anti-war expression.

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Politicization of the environmental agenda

“ The Russian environmental movement has great potential to turn local mobilization and rebellion into a mass movement for system change.

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ILLUSTRATION: KARIN ZARIC SUNVISSON

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Civic activism in Russia

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Baltic Worlds is published by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University, Sweden.

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Printed by

Multiply Solutions,

Lidköping 2026

Printed: ISSN 2000-2955

Online: ISSN 2001-7308

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Introduction.

To be or not to be? Russian civil society under repression

This special issue contributes to the ongoing analysis of the transformations Russian society has undergone since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It follows in the footsteps of several earlier special issues: Irina Meyer-Olimpieva's special issue in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratisation – Russians and the War* (2025)¹ focused on the negative effects of the war on Russians both inside and outside of the country and the foundations of pro-war sentiments; and Regina Smyth's and Veronica Kostenko's special issue of *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2026)² on Russian women's anti-war ac-

tivism after February 2022. It also complements Anastassia Obydenkova's special issue of essays analysing the conditions for environmental activism and NGOs in the period of 2022–2025 in *Russian Analytical Digest* (2025).³ As well as adds on to the recent special issue by Margarita Zavadskaya, Tsyplyma Darieva and Tatiana Golova and in *Post-Soviet Affairs* on transnational activism among exiled Russians.⁴

SIMILAR TO THE above-mentioned collections, this special issue brings together analytical contributions founded in evidence-based empirical research based on qualitative interviews and participant observations conducted inside Russia both

before and after the start of the full-scale invasion. Given the growing difficulties and risks associated with data collection for both researchers and interlocutors, as described by Elisa Marin and Oliver Skye (pseudonyms) in their methodological essay, such empirically rich publications, especially those analysing in depth the transformation of various civil society initiatives will soon become a rarity, and therefore make this special issue an important contribution to the study of the rapidly changing field.

What is new in this issue? First, it brings together a wide range of genres: peer-reviewed articles, analytical and methodological essays as well as an inter-



Anti-war graffiti in Vladimir, April 2022.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF DOVOD

view with a Soviet dissident, all written by both scholars and activists. Second, it suggests a broader outlook on civil society, focusing not only on political and civic activism. As such, the contributions examine acts of resistance within professional communities, as well as specific identity-based and issue-based forms of activism, including decolonial, feminist, climate, and environmental initiatives. Finally, the issue seeks to offer a bird's

eye perspective on the transformation of activist initiatives over the past four years. It also traces changes in the landscape of organizational structures and explores how different initiatives have positioned themselves in relation to the regime and the war.

AUTHORS IN this issue agree that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the following political repression has not

completely destroyed Russian civil society, but acting as a catalyst, sped up a process of authoritarian transformation and consolidation of Vladimir Putin's regime that started long time before. Irina Meyer-Olimpieva writes that, as the result of a long term authoritarian state-building and its sharp escalation and tightening of public sphere after 2022, different segments of Russian civil society diverted its trajectories: more institutionalized

“THE ISSUE SEEKS TO OFFER A BIRD’S EYE PERSPECTIVE ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF ACTIVIST INITIATIVES.”

and politicised organizations were dismantled, while grassroots decentralised initiatives expanded and intensified with the use of social media technologies slipping over national borders. Against this background, Meyer-Olimpieva raises an important analytical question: Instead of centering research focus on formal organizations with explicit political agendas, contemporary research should consider studying less explicitly political and informal forms of civic engagement.

Responding to this call several articles in this issue conceptualize civil society broader than the dominant normative models usually do. While some explore organizations, which rely on the state, others also include pre-political and post-political initiatives into their research lens.

NAVIGATION OF existing constraints and attempts to use any means available for expressing dissent are well-documented in two texts about professional communities inside and outside the country: teachers and health-care professionals. The authors of the essay “We comply, but do not obey” explain how professional activity can become political when it challenges both the national educational system and the broader authoritarian order. Since 2022, opposition-minded teachers have adopted two main principal strategies of resistance: a collective and an individual one, showing not only remarkable ways of navigating power, risks and unexpected opening they provide, but also a will to stay true to their own convictions. The authors also draw an important conclusion: this quiet resistance should not be read as a prelude to open opposition, but rather as mere adaptation to existing repressive conditions, which simultaneously undermines authoritarian power, albeit very slowly.

After the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, according to the authors of the article “Professional as Political” many

health-care providers, especially those who have emigrated, realised a political potential in their everyday professional work, which in the times of crisis cannot be separated from the political. Looking back at their professional practice that took place before the start of the full-scale invasion, they understood that political neutrality can be relinquished in pursuit of systematic change. Hence, “professional is political” claim means challenging both the healthcare system and the authoritarian political regime.

Doriana Althier, Maria Tysiachniouk, and Juha Kotilainen, confirm that environmental movement also has a potential to survive amid repression, but also draw attention to the rise of patriotic environmentalism accelerated by the war. While many grassroots initiatives distanced themselves from overt political engagement for the sake of survival, GONGOs embraced nationalist and sovereign ecology. The authors argue that such polarization of environmental initiatives is the result of the state’s co-optation and instrumentalization of the environmental agenda on the one hand, and repression and criminalization of independent initiatives, on the other. While avoiding sensitive issues, independent initiatives now focus more on practical and more local activities, such as recycling and garbage collection.

SVETLANA ERPYLEVA’S research shows that even though climate movement demobilized immediately after and as a result of the start of the full-scale invasion, the war was not the only reason for the movement’s dissolution. The war served as a catalyst for the tendencies that have emerged long before: the lack of tangible results, high risks of street protests, the lack of alternative formats and the unequal engagement of different activists. While the laws de-facto establishing wartime censorship and political repressions, proved street protest impossible, the war itself polarized activists weighting wheth-

er climate change is the main agenda for protest at the moment.

Vitaly Servetnik, however, has a more optimistic outlook on the political potential of environmental activism. He believes that despite the repression, there is a still room for maneuver for the cross-border collaboration between domestic and exiled activists. Given environmental professionals ally with grassroots actors and adopt a broader intersectional agenda linking it to the global one, such collaboration is very much possible.

SO, WE OBSERVE a general trend: mobilization of loyal supporters, is accompanied by the systematic repression of dissent. While citizens are pressured to demonstrate compliance with the regime and the war, anti-regime and anti-war initiatives are stigmatized and silenced through fear.

As Ekaterina Kalinina describes in the article documenting the dynamic transformation of the Russian civil society during 2022–2025, authoritarian repression has forced civic and political activists to adopt low-visibility and outward depoliticized informal forms of dissent to stay afloat. Civic and political initiatives have not collapsed completely, even though many of them had to emigrate or dissolve out of fear of criminal charges. Instead, they have gradually adapted to the present conditions to maintain the basic principle of solidarity trying to use every possibility to train new activists and preserve already existing networks. This transformation, however, is hardly linear and rather dynamic corresponding to the political openings and resources civil society has at the moment.

Eeva Kuikka’s article stresses that gender and sexuality became prominent among decolonial activists in 2023 and 2024, focusing on gender-specific inequalities and promoting LGBTQ rights, hence indicating a broader expansion of decolonial initiatives’ agendas than before. She also shows that emigrated

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“SEVERAL SCHOLARS POINTED OUT THE CENTRALITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AND THE SURVIVAL OF RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS.”

decolonial initiatives in order to stay relevant for their home communities, have to navigate between forced imposition of so-called traditional values in the national republics by the state and the imperialist hierarchies inherent in Western discourses. As she writes, the activists in precarious life situations in their host countries face a difficult dilemma: any criticism of Western imperialism can be misinterpreted as propaganda of Russian neo-conservative values, while the use of decolonial vocabulary can easily alienate them from their domestic audiences as it could be perceived as a call for territorial disintegration.


Several scholars pointed out the centrality of digital media for social mobilization and the survival of Russian civil society actors. However, very few addressed the issue of contradictory affordances of digital media ecosystems that both enable oppositional political expression and practices and impose structural constraints. Daniil Zhaivoronok, using media realism as a conceptual framework, describes how fem-activists recognise the problematic neo-liberal structure of popular ICTs, but continue to rely on them for visibility to gather supporters, adopting their tactical repertoire and negotiating their ethics in authoritarian conditions.

THUS, THE ARTICLES collected in this issue point to a broader trend. On the one hand, the Russian state has intensified its efforts to mobilize citizens in support of the regime, the war, and its ideological project. On the other hand, it has worked hard to demobilize alternative political, moral, and civic positions by making dissent risky, organizationally fragile, and often publicly invisible. Civil society, in this context, survives not primarily through open confrontation, but through low-risk practices that preserve solidarity and trust. This is precisely why the question

“to be or not to be?” cannot be answered simply by asking whether mass protest exists or whether formal organizations remain active. The more analytically productive question is how civil society continues to exist under conditions that are explicitly designed to make oppositional collective action impossible.

THIS BRINGS US to a broader historical and conceptual discussion. The contemporary situation in Russia is often compared to the Soviet period, usually in ways that suggest that late Soviet authoritarianism was, in some respects, less intrusive than the present regime. In such comparisons, the late Soviet state appears as a system that primarily demanded public conformity: citizens were expected to perform loyalty, reproduce official language, and maintain the required ideological façade, while their private opinions and everyday practices could remain relatively autonomous. This is the social world famously captured by Alexei Yurchak’s argument that late Soviet ideology functioned through ritualized reproduction rather than through sincere belief⁵.

However, this comparison is analytically limited if “the Soviet period” is implicitly equated with late socialism. The contemporary Russian state appears more coercive and ideologically demanding precisely because it does not merely require public compliance, but increasingly seeks active emotional, moral, and ideological identification with the regime, the war, as well as the state’s geopolitical project. Yet this dynamic looks less exceptional when compared not with late socialism, but with earlier Soviet periods, when the state also sought to discipline speech and behavior, and produce loyal ideological subjects. The difference, of course, is that contemporary Russia has not reproduced the scale of mass terror characteristic of Stalinism. Still, the

comparison with earlier Soviet practices allows us to see that today’s Russian authoritarianism is not only performative, but increasingly mobilizational: it aims to transform passive conformity into demonstrative commitment in hearts and in minds, as described in the interview with the Soviet dissident interviewed in this issue by Elisa Marin and Oliver Skye. 

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Note: This issue is prepared within the frames of the research project Sustainable Urban Development: Agency, Networks and Communication in uncertain times, financed by The Foundation for Baltic and Eastern European Studies.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Oliver Skye who has helped me preparing this issue. He has done tremendous work with the authors.

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An illustration showing the artist Alexandra (Sasha) Skochilenko being dragged away by the police.

IMAGE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RUSSIA AFTER 2022

by Ekaterina Kalinina

abstract

This article examines the transformation of civic engagement in Russia after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on more than a hundred interviews with civic and political activists across several Russian regions, the article traces how anti-war and oppositional initiatives transformed under conditions of escalating repression. Using a micro-sociological approach, the article foregrounds emotions and strategic dilemmas as key (dis)enablers of civic engagement alongside with the political opportunity structures. It argues that Russian civil society has not collapsed, but has moved through several stages of the initial moral shock and immediate mobilization, towards fragmentation and cautious re-mobilization. By 2026 civic engagement persists primarily through informal and low-visibility forms, using strategic depoliticization as a tactic to survive.

KEYWORDS: Civic engagement, Russian civil society, anti-war activism, repression, emotions, moral dilemmas, strategic depoliticization.

Four years after the start of the full-scale invasion, the debates about whether Russian civil society can stop the war or overthrow the regime have become less analytically productive for understanding how civic engagement transforms under prolonged repression. From the perspective of social movement and civil society research, the absence of regime's change or war's end is not, by itself, a sufficient indicator that civic engagement has disappeared or failed. At the same time, the absence of mass protests does not imply the lack of civic engagement. Therefore, alongside existing research,¹ this article asks how civic activity largely shaped by anti-war and oppositional attitudes has evolved since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Previous research suggests a complex picture, as demobilization has not occurred uniformly or instantaneously, and in some regions, both the capacity and the hope for sustained civic engagement persisted until the end

of 2024.² Decline in public civic activity cannot be attributed solely to repressive legislation, the forced closure of civil society organizations, the emigration of leaders, or the severe persecution of individuals. Emotional exhaustion, fear, and a sense of hopelessness have also played a significant role in curbing collective action. To make sense of the complex process of sequences of gains and losses of Russian civil society during the last four years, I apply micro-sociological approach, which includes process tracing and presents a chronological narrative that foregrounds emotion as an integral dimension of political mobilization.³ This approach allows me to analyze the motivations, decisions, and emotional responses of civic and political activists in Russia since 2022, and to better understand why some individuals choose to continue to act despite escalating repression.

Civic engagement in Russia

Research on Russian civil society before 2022 has shown that activism was neither absent⁴ nor politically insignificant⁵, but often took localized,⁶ informal,⁷ and issue-based forms⁸ that do not fit conventional forms of participation.⁹ Research on urban movements in Russia revealed new forms of grassroots activism and political engagement evolving around issues that concern people's immediate environment such as housing,¹⁰ cultural heritage,¹¹ urban development¹² and ecology.¹³

Researchers pointed out that social mobilization implied new forms of organization.¹⁴ Scholars have identified a shift from professionalization and formalization of NGOs to informal organizing, often assisted by social media platforms.¹⁵ The contraction of political freedoms, the decline in foreign funding, and the availability of web-based communication and fundraising technologies have contributed to that change. Similar tendencies of decentralization were also noticed around the same time in urban activism: in the 2010s–2020s activists started to build networks capable of functioning without leaders and learn how to use available resources and fractures between political elites.¹⁶ This urban activism took place in the political conditions with Russian legislation regulating the work of NGOs and civil society initiatives, which left little room for political action in its conventional sense.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the years prior to the full-scale invasion have also seen trade-union activism, urban governance activism, and popular protest against policy reforms.¹⁸

MOREOVER, politicization of previously apolitical forms of civic engagement took place. If prior to Bolotnaya mobilization many Russian local activists deliberately distanced themselves from politics, grounding their position in a moral opposition between real deed and abstract politics, after the protest events of 2011–2012 activists began to combine practical problem-solving with oppo-

sitional political language, articulating their politicization.¹⁹

Research on Russian civil society after 2022 has shown that Russians have engaged in street protests and built networks of solidarity supporting political detainees and Ukrainian refugees early on,²⁰ until repression became highly effective in reducing visible anti-war mobilization.²¹ Several analytical reports published after the start of the full-scale invasion²² mentioned that many civic and political activists emigrated in 2022–2023 driven primarily by security concerns. Meanwhile in Russia, dissent has largely moved underground or took the form of anti-war street art protest or media activism.²³ Several studies highlight how Russian civil society has adapted under repression.²⁴

THE STUDIES identified a wide range of grassroots civil society initiatives that have emerged across the country after 2022 including anti-war, humanitarian aid networks,²⁵ legal support for political prisoners and assistance for relocation. Some activists shifted focus to local initiatives, creating trusted third places.²⁶ Safe areas like ecology and animal welfare served as gateways into activism and skill-building.²⁷ The studies showed that anti-war and oppositional initiatives often operated under high risk and remained deliberately informal and anonymous to avoid state persecution. They continued to develop decentralized organizational structures and use covert communication tactics to survive, indicating strategic adaptation of these initiatives. Some studies name solidarity as one of the main organizational principles and point to, for example, the convergence of decolonial activism and feminism in the context of the war.²⁸

Recent scholarship has also begun to address the non-liberal and regime-compatible initiatives.²⁹ Work on the grassroots origins of Russian illiberalism points to the importance of understanding illiberal social actors beyond the state itself,³⁰ while recent studies of wartime Russia examine pro-war mobilization³¹ and the Put' Domoj movement,³² challenging any simple opposition between civil society and the regime as well as clear-cut image of pro-regime and pro-war supporters.

These studies complicate the assumption that Russian civil society has either collapsed under authoritarian pressure or been fully co-opted into the state's ideological machinery. While many initiatives have indeed gone underground or shifted to low-risk spheres, others have continued to operate within allowed frameworks, albeit cautiously. Against this background, the present article will contribute to the existing bulk of research by closely analyzing the reasons why civic and political activists continue resistance to authoritarianism in Russia after 2022 and how it has evolved during the last years by focusing on emotions that precede (de)mobilizations and strategic dilemmas the activists face.

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Gains, losses and emotions

To understand what happens with civil society in Russia this article draws on James M. Jasper's framework of strategic interactions.³³ This approach centers not only on the outcomes of social mobilization, both intended and unintended, but also on the emotional and cognitive dynamics that shape activist' perceptions of success and failure.³⁴ Crucially, it enables us to trace smaller, often overlooked gains and losses that occur over time, especially under conditions where large-scale mobilization is unlikely. Given that civil society actors in Russia are not engaged in an open confrontation and mass protests, a micro-sociological lens that captures smaller gains and losses produced through the concrete choices activists make as they face strategic dilemmas in their everyday practice, seems more appropriate.

Jasper's framework allows us to examine how activists navigate these strategic dilemmas, personal and professional commitments, external risks and emotions in the context of war and oppression. Jasper and others distinguish between trade-offs, which are structural constraints, and dilemmas, which emerge when players are forced to consciously weigh costs and values.³⁵ These include *being there dilemma* (engagement vs boycott of arena), *engagement dilemma* (favorable outcomes vs risks), *extension dilemma* (new allies vs difficulties in coordination), *false-areas dilemma* (symbolic wins vs tangible impact and power), *Janus dilemma* (focus inwards vs outwards), *naughty-or-nice dilemma* (aggressive actions vs loss of popularity), *powerful allies dilemma* (collaboration vs co-optation) and *pyramid dilemma* (horizontal vs hierarchical structure). Faced with dilemmas, players always have to weight out options, which often come with costs and risks, and might simultaneously lead to gains and losses. In this article we will identify these dilemmas and trace how activists grapple with them, often making decisions that carry both symbolical meanings and material consequences. Importantly, these dilemmas are not resolved through rational calculation alone but are shaped by emotions and affective attachments people have.

JASPER ARGUES that emotions are integral to all stages of protest: from recruitment and commitment to sustained participation and eventual decline. According to him emotions are not irrational impulses but are culturally embedded and cognitively shaped responses that reflect deep attachments to values.³⁶ Jasper distinguishes between *transitory emotional reactions*, such as fear, anger, or indignation in response to new information or events, and *underlying affective commitments*, such as loyalty to a community, that give those reactions meaning and direction. Emotions, then, function as both *triggers* and *sustainers* of political engagement. As Jasper³⁷ puts it, "not only are emotions part

of our responses to events, but they also shape the goals of our actions". This dual structure of emotion is central to how protest activities unfold: activists are not simply reacting to external events; they are acting from within emotional cultures that shape what they see as unjust, who they blame, and what they believe can be changed. Emotions also differ across actors, and the same event may produce resignation in some, but righteous anger in others.

JASPER OUTLINES a number of emotional mechanisms that will be identified in this article.³⁸ *Moral shocks*, i.e. unexpected events that provoke outrage, often serve as entry points into activism. These shocks, however, only generate action when they resonate with pre-existing emotional attachments, and therefore not everyone will be ready to go to the streets shocked by an unexpected proclamation of war. *Fear*, which can paralyze many, is another powerful emotion, as it could, if interpreted through moral frames, become a source of *outrage*, *blame attribution*, and subsequent mobilization. Activists work to channel these emotions into shared indignation by framing events as violations of collective values.

Jasper also notes the difference between emotions experi-

enced outside the movement (incentives to join or support it) and those inside it (which shape group cohesion or disintegration). Moods such as *frustration*, *hope*, or *camaraderie* function as emotional glue that keeps movements alive, while negative cycles of demoralization can lead to decline or abeyance. Collins similarly emphasizes that "emotions are the glue of solidarity and what mobilizes the conflict".³⁹ In authoritarian settings such as wartime Russia, where open protest is high-risk, emotional dynamics become even more significant.

I also loosely make use of political opportunity structure theory (POS) and repertoires of contention.⁴⁰ POS helps me trace how shifts in intensity of repression and the perceived risks and efficacy of actions create perceived opportunities for acts of contention. Meanwhile the concept of repertoires of contention allows me to view demobilization not only as a decline in numbers but also as a reconfiguration of available forms of action towards lower-risk and more clandestine practices. Emotions mediate these shifts: moral shock and anger initially fueled street protests and the rapid formation of solidarity networks, whereas fear and fatigue shaped by escalating repression and demobilizing propaganda have progressively narrowed the repertoire of actions that individuals perceive as both legitimate and sustainable.

Interviews

The empirical material for this article was collected in several waves: summer 2023, autumn 2023, spring-summer 2024,

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autumn 2024, winter 2024–2025, summer 2025 and winter 2025–2026. The study deliberately sought regional diversity by interviewing activists from several federal districts: Urals Federal District, North-Western Federal District, Central Federal District and Siberian Federal District. Ethical approval for data collection and subsequent analysis was granted by the Swedish Ethical Board in May 2023. Besides transcribed interviews used to write this article, fieldwork notes were used as contextual material that informed research design. The article draws on the full dataset of 178 interviews (aged between 19 and 55; 102 women and 76 men across 15 different cities). Due to word limit quotations from 15 interviews were used in the article because they best captured key patterns identified across the wider dataset, while also providing rich detail. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling: all interviewees were actively involved in civic and/or political activism and their engagement was often organized around city space, local communities, urban development, heritage preservation, environmental issues, third places, and local city politics. Participants were included if they self-identified as activists and were involved in civic initiatives after February 2022, as well as were able to reflect on how the war and repression had affected their activities. Initiatives closely affiliated with or overseen by the state in our sample, despite the presence of grassroots projects, were not included. The sample also excludes initiatives that, while not explicitly affiliated with the state, do not actively oppose or challenge it. In addition, data does not cover a broad range of service-oriented organizations, such as those supporting victims of gender-based violence, people living with HIV, or children with disabilities, which primarily aim to fill gaps in state provision and often need to collaborate with state institutions to operate effectively.

WHILE POLITICAL position was not formally used as a selection criterion, fieldwork conditions – particularly reliance on trusted networks and risk minimization – inevitably structured access to respondents. This resulted in a sample in which anti-war and regime-critical perspectives were predominant. Of those interviewed, 22 had migrated from Russia, while the rest were still active in the country at the time of the interview.

To ensure participants' anonymity, the names of the cities in which they were based are not disclosed, and all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms. This decision reflects the risks faced by activists in Russia, where organized action interpreted by the authorities as political or oppositional may result in criminal prosecution, imprisonment, or other forms of repression.

Each interview was conducted in a location chosen by the interviewee, ensuring a safe and comfortable environment. The overall duration of the interviews was on average two to three hours long. Interviews were structured as biographical interviews with sections about activities before 2022 and after the start of the full-scale invasion. All conversations were held in Russian by native-speakers. The analysis of transcribed interviews combined inductive thematic coding with attention to emotional narratives, strategic dilemmas and changes in forms of civic and political engagement over time.

Moral shock and mobilization in the immediate aftermath

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 produced what James Jasper describes as *moral shock*, i.e. a sudden, overwhelming emotion, that confronts individuals with a strong contrast between their held values and the perceived moral collapse of the surrounding world:⁴¹

It was all so *shocking*. The second really terrifying moment was when they started talking about tactical nuclear strikes. And we were just sitting there like ... Fuck, that crazy old man. He really could ... the old man is just insane. That was seriously terrifying. *When you can't really assess the logic.*

(PT, an urban and humanitarian activist, big city)

At the very beginning I was really anxious, really scared and horrified. I mean, it was obvious even from the beginning that it was a *total disaster*, like that morning when I woke up and read the news.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

It felt like I'd been hit on the top of the head with the blunt side of an axe. I remember that first day almost down to the second, how I'm talking to my dad, how *he doesn't believe it at first*, how I'm trying to explain that it's all. And by the evening, *everyone is in shock*, realizing this is no joke.

(LN, an urban activist, big city)

The words such as *ужас* (horror), *нуждеу* (fucking disaster) and *шок* (shock) captured a moral shock caused by the rupture between the respondents's worldviews and the state's actions. Moral shock, usually an initial emotional catalyst for political action, occurs when events challenge an individual's moral universe that they cannot ignore, forcing a reassessment of core values and the systems of beliefs that uphold them⁴². In this case, the invasion shook the ideas many activists held about the limits of state violence and international norms producing a sense of unreality.

Jasper⁴³ writes that a moral shock, provoked by a violation of deeply held values, produces not only outrage but also the compulsion to act. Indeed, the outbreak of the full-scale war raised such a *sense of anger and outrage* in people that it triggered spontaneous protest activities, involving not only those who had previously engaged in political activity but also individuals who had never before participated in public protest or volunteered in solidarity with others. Already on the morning of 24 February 2022, when the headlines about the military attack on Kiev flooded the news outlets, people went onto the streets in more than 50 cities across Russia:

The action started the next day. I honestly didn't have time for deep emotional processing, because the pro-

tests were happening every day in the beginning. I didn't go to every protest, because some were small and felt pointless. But I went to all the major ones, on weekends. Going out every single day didn't make sense, but it was still nearly every day.

(PT, an urban and humanitarian activist, big city)

Then February 24th arrived. First, the 22nd came with the (announcement of) annexation. And then came the 24th. I also have relatives in Ukraine. That added fuel to the fire. I don't think I slept at all the night of the 23rd into the 24th, because everything was already clear. By 2 a.m., by 4 a.m., the tanks were already rolling. So, on the afternoon of the 24th, my friends and I went to protest.

(PL, an urban activist, big city)

Both activists describe how the protests began immediately following the announcement of the full-scale invasion indicating a rapid conversion of moral shock into action. At the same time, they also recollect that there was no pause for reflection, no time to fully process the events and their scale at that time. Instead, the protest became a way of coping with the emotional weight of the moment, when through the action one can both forget about what is going on as well as become helpful to others. The first quotation also shows a strategic choice made before going on the street: the activist weighs the perceived impact or effectiveness of each protest activity and chooses the one that will have the higher visibility and the impact. The second quotation shows a personal connection to the events through the phrase *I have relatives in Ukraine*. This familial relation intensifies emotional rupture and makes the war a very personal event. The activist therefore does not wait for the organized protest to be announced, they go on the street spontaneously, proving that the initial mobilization occurred through a strong emotion. They continue their story further giving the evidence that these first anti-war protests included many first-time protesters:

That evening there was a big protest, and I went there as well. It was clear that *many people were attending a protest for the very first time in their lives*. A lot of them were wearing *totally unprepared outfits*. You know, if you've been going to protests since 2012, you wear the right clothes, good shoes, a small backpack that no one can grab onto. *You're prepared*. But these people had clearly just left work and come straight to the protest. Many were holding signs, even though *by that point everyone knew* that holding a sign was basically a guaranteed arrest. Still, intuitively, you could feel that these were people who, *for the first time in their lives*, had decided to come to a protest. Then the police showed up, and everyone immediately started running. Again,

if you've been going to protests since 2012 or whatever, *you know* that the arrival of the police doesn't necessarily mean you have to flee. You can often stand there a while, even face-to-face with OMON.

(PL, an urban activist, big city)

One can see that the lack of experience of going on the streets by many anti-war first-timers have resulted in the quick curdling of the protest. By drawing attention to the *potent gear*, the activist, who was a protest veteran themselves, makes it clear that new publics were spontaneously mobilized by the outrage, but they lacked the necessarily knowledge and experience. They observe both courage and vulnerability of these new participants by pointing out to the sincerity of their action but also helplessness:

So it was, on the one hand, deeply sincere, because I realized that for some people, their political life was just beginning. But on the other hand, it was all incredibly helpless.

(PL, an urban activist, big city)

They capture a moment of both hope and despair. For the speaker, witnessing others become politicized is emotionally moving, but the lack of experience renders it tragic. It also shows that political activity that emerges without sufficient

institutional back up creates an exposure and vulnerabilities that can be effectively used by coercive state, if the state has enough capacity to attack and had made sure that the institutional support for protest is long gone.

“THE STATE REPRESSION ESCALATED DRASTICALLY, NOT ALLOWING THE PROTESTS TO BECOME MASSIVE.”

SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH spontaneous demonstrations, this early mobilization included various forms of dissent such as online petitions from professional communities driven largely by an outrage with the outbreak of full-scale war. Quickly “inchoate anxieties

and fears” transformed “into moral indignation and outrage toward concrete policies and decision makers”.⁴⁴ In this case, the Russian state, and particularly Vladimir Putin, became the central figure of blame. Through various forms of protest and civil action, activists began to articulate a shared moral judgment: the war was unjust, and its continuation an intolerable moral transgression.

The state repression escalated drastically, not allowing the protests to become massive. More than 1 974 people were detained already on the first day. After two weeks of protests the number of detained in more than a hundred cities increased ten times – 14 906.⁴⁵ The protestors were met with police brutality, including the beating and detention of women, the elderly, and minors, who had usually been spared:

People [...] were being detained in droves, including people in wheelchairs.

(PL, an urban activist, big city)

Such brutality prompted legal professionals and volunteers with no prior protest experience to provide detainees with legal and humanitarian support,⁴⁶ resulting in *paradox of repression*,⁴⁷ i.e. backfiring of state violence, when “in the face off state repression – clearly a loss”⁴⁸ – protesters redouble their efforts and mobilize because of the increase indignation.⁴⁹ As a result, people who might not have joined the protests otherwise, were “drawn in by the new grievances of police violence”.⁵⁰

IN MARCH 2022, the Russian government introduced a suite of repressive laws (e.g., the so-called *fake news* law and the criminalization of anti-war speech) that effectively outlawed most forms of public anti-war expression. These legislative changes signaled a strategic consolidation of authoritarian control, narrowing the political opportunities for anti-war mobilization, and effectively resulted in the decline of open anti-war protest movement. By criminalizing anti-war speech, the Russian state closed off a key avenue for both individual and collective expression of grievances and dissent, converting even symbolic acts of resistance into prosecutable offence.

Limbo: demobilization during summer-autumn 2022

Contrary to expectations, media visibility did not offer protection; rather, it became evident that public prominence was insufficient to prevent arrest or imprisonment. High-profile criminal cases were initiated against opposition politicians such as Ilya Yashin (arrested June 27, 2022 and charged in December 2022) Alexei Gorinov (April 26, 2022), and Andrei Pivovarov (May 2022), as well as artists (e.g., Sasha Skochilenko March 31, 2022).⁵¹ These actions of the state reinforced the perception that no one was safe from punishment, and that the actual costs of participation⁵² in public anti-war protest dramatically increased. As surveillance technologies were deployed to identify participants both before and after protests, potential protestors had to consider the near-total absence of anonymity. The fear of prosecution, the feeling of doom and a difficulty to find an appropriate and effective action have resulted in the decrease of civic and anti-war mobilization over the spring-summer, with people no longer going on the streets:

And then the protests just stopped. The next ones didn't happen until September. I mean, there was something, but nothing large-scale anymore. That's when the intimidation and arrests started. The lawyer said: 'There's nothing we can do here anymore'. I mean, what could we do? All we could do was bring care packages. That's when a kind of melancholy set in.

(PT, an urban and humanitarian activist, big city)

Speed and swiftness with which the repressive apparatus cracked down the protesters, have showed that people have nothing to set against the unprecedented coercion and unpredictability of the state, which could detain anyone and at any time. One could have gotten detained after protesting in a public



Ilya Yashin in a police van after being detained during the 2021 Russian protests.



Aleksei Gorinov displaying his poster during the trial, stating *Вам ещё нужна эта война?* (English: “Do you still want this war?”)



The artist Sasha Skochilenko was imprisoned on March 31, 2022.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: CHANGEORG

space only just a few minutes, but also for a mere intent to be present on the streets:

I do have an article [administrative charge] from that time, but it's a really ridiculous one, because it's not even for a real protest. I went to the city X that day because I knew something might happen, but it was already obvious that, like, nothing was going to happen as everything was closed, the metro was blocked. They just held me out on the street. It was stupid, because it wasn't even a protest. I wasn't even trying to attend one, technically.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

The charge against the urban activist was absurd: they were punished not for participating in a demonstration, but simply for being in public space on a day when a protest took place. This was preemptive repression: by spring-summer 2022, punishment had become detached from actual action and could be imposed in advance to prevent emerging forms of solidarity. The exercise of power became arbitrary and unpredictable, nurturing an idea that any form of public appearance should be avoided at any costs, as the charges can also be fabricated if needed:

The official report said I was standing there shouting, with signs and ribbons and everything. I mean, the entire police van was filled with people whose protocols were completely fabricated.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

These openly fabricated charges lead to bewilderment and disorientation, which further curtailed mobilization:

And I still don't get it – why bother doing that when there are plenty of people who are actually going around with ribbons and protesting? Why detain people like me?

(PN, an urban activist, big city).

Initial mobilization and moral outrage gave way to what respondents called социальная кома (social coma) or paralysis. Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, triggered by the war and the state's rapid introduction and enforcement of repressive laws, overwhelmed people's capacity to act. While both dread and anger can arise in response to sudden change, only the latter tends to lead to mobilization.⁵³ Given that the repressive apparatus worked swiftly to stop any social mobilization, dread deepened the sense of futility and limited the channels through

which anger might have been legitimized and directed. Expectedly, activists “resign(ed) themselves to unpleasant changes”.⁵⁴

One of the activists describe this period as a time of uncertainty, reflecting on how the outbreak of war led them to question whether they could continue living in Russia and, if so, what kind of work would still be possible. Their internal questioning “If I stayed, what could I still do? If not, where would I go and when?” (PN, an activist, big city) captures a moment of existential crisis and *being there dilemma*. Grappling with this dilemma, questioning on whether they can leave the country blocked any type of activity.

THIS DILEMMA was closely connected with another one – *false-arena dilemma*. The activist in this particular case starts to perceive their professional arena as inseparable from the state, the collaboration with which now presents a moral transgression:

“FEELINGS OF HELPLESSNESS AND POWERLESSNESS, TRIGGERED BY THE WAR AND THE STATE'S RAPID INTRODUCTION AND ENFORCEMENT OF REPRESSIVE LAWS, OVERWHELMED PEOPLE'S CAPACITY TO ACT.”

It just felt impossible to work on any kind of development projects during a war.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

The activist tried to figure out what felt right to do in a context of war, reflecting on how this moral shock radically reframed the meaning of their previously apolitical work. What once may have been seen as an important contribution to the societal development and creation of a comfortable city, was now perceived as a morally contaminated collaboration with a criminal player – the state. Hence, continuing professional engagement with the state would violate the sense of identity by forcing activists to betray or compromise on core values. Moreover, the realization that the activist's power to influence is curtailed by one more powerful player, points to the *powerful ally dilemma* and a risk of cooptation:

I was this endless number of questions, which were mostly connected with not wanting to stay and engage with something I wouldn't be able to engage with. For example, all those bureaus or federal programs, those urban planning programs, because all of that means working with the state.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

The quote also reflects an emotional suspension, where existing cognitive and emotional frameworks have not yet fully caught up with the new reality. Moreover, it points to the constrained opportunities caused by the internal emotional state, where meaningful engagement with societal issues is almost impossible, not only because of the repression, i.e. external constraints, but because of the moral boundaries that make the choice of col-

laborating with the state unacceptable as it would mean being complicit in war.

Silence as a political and social condition

Shrinking of public space and the repressive legislature that censored speech and actions, have led to silencing of those, who did not agree with the state politics. Activists revealed that they were struck by a sudden mutism, a profound inability or unwillingness to speak about the war either publicly or privately. During this period, individuals could not determine with whom and about what one could speak safely. This lack of recognizable cues and shared interpretive frames is politically significant, as it prevents the emergence of what Gamson calls *injustice frames*, “a way of viewing a situation or condition that expresses indignation or outrage over a perceived injustice, as well as finding some human agency to blame for the transgression”.⁵⁵ Injustice frames are central to the emergence of political agency as they shape how individuals interpret events and decide whether to resist or accept them:

And then the war happened, and *everything became painfully clear*. There was absolutely no way for me to say something like: ‘This war didn’t happen’, or ‘We were the ones attacked’. That option didn’t exist for me at all. I honestly don’t understand how you can claim to be attacked after crossing into someone else’s territory.
(KT, a humanitarian activists, big city)

In these words of a humanitarian activist there is no ambiguity, which suggests a fully developed injustice frame. The speaker has identified the invasion as a violation and attributed blame to the Russian state, and, implicitly to those who produces such narratives. What intensifies the activist’s emotional distress is the existence of competing injustice frames among their closest relatives:

Some of my relatives cheerfully told me that *we* were attacked. And that has become one of the biggest problems, maybe even a tragedy, in my life, because I can hardly speak with my parents. I mean, I do talk to them, have coffee, ask how they’re doing, but I can’t really have conversations, can’t discuss anything meaningful, because my parents believe that we were attacked.
(KT, a humanitarian activist, big city)

These competing injustice frames produce profound alienation. The inability to talk meaningfully with one’s own parents is not just frustrating; it becomes an existential personal tragedy:

I haven’t been able to get through to them, to express my view, to overcome this. Maybe it’s their age, or maybe it’s the loss of Soviet identity, as I’ve suddenly come to realize. Because at some point, after a while had passed, my mother said to me: ‘I’ve always believed

that this is our territory’. My eyes nearly popped out of my head. I had never heard her say anything like that before.

(KT, a humanitarian activist, big city)

They acknowledge their inability *to get through* to their parents, stressing that appeals to reason do not work as propagandistic narratives are so deeply rooted in the worldview of their parents, and therefore reveal the limits of persuasion.

Meanwhile, the last open public mass street protests took place in Russia in September 2022, when the Kremlin announced partial mobilization.⁵⁶ It was reported about 833 detained in 36 cities in one day, which is similar in number to the detentions months prior.⁵⁷ These high legal costs of political participation and deliberate targeting of protestors by the state led to the end of the public protest activities, despite the moral outrage that could trigger wide protest mobilization.

By 2023 mass street protest became uncommon with only very local actions and single-picketing taking place across the country. But as many experts have pointed out, the end to mass street protests does not mean that Russians have stopped protesting or civil society has ceased to exist.⁵⁸ In fact, the forms of dissent in Russia have transformed in response to external pressures that render public dissent increasingly dangerous,⁵⁹ while many civic organizations were forced to go underground or adopt elaborated communicative practices to avoid undesired attention from the state authorities. Despite these obvious signals of perseverance and resilience of civil society in Russia, it is important not to overlook the broader demobilization that has taken place since 2022. There has also been a notable decline in the number of civic initiatives across Russian society after that.

Social fragmentation and strategic depolitization in 2023

Rage gradually dissolved and resulted in detachment:

Now I don’t feel anything. I mean, I feel detached. I don’t feel like I’d go and set a military enlistment office on fire in a fit of rage. In a way, I actually feel safer.
(PL, an urban activist, big city)

The speaker describes that rage no longer translates into an impulse for radical action, but into self-containment. This evolution also reflects a shift in the *naughty-or-nice dilemma*, where less aggressive tactics may offer greater gains – staying alive and active – than losses, such as imprisonment. Emotional distancing thus becomes a protective strategy: by disconnecting from rage or despair, the activist preserves the capacity to function and sustain agency under extreme conditions:

I have this feeling that we’re like animals living in the forest, and you know there are wolves walking around, and they could tear you apart at any moment. But what are you supposed to do – just lie down and die? So, you just keep going, like some herbivore, really – you

just walk around and hope that maybe they'll eat some other herbivore instead of you.

(PL, an urban activist, big city)

Rather than giving in to despair, activists adapted to heightened repression through the strategic depoliticization of action, a strategy used in conflict zones when label political can lead to losing of legitimacy.⁶⁰ For Russian activists, framing their work as non-political, meant avoiding activities that the state could interpret as political and therefore punishable. As civic action itself became increasingly politicized by the state,⁶¹ and safe avenues for dissent disappeared, activists withdrew from high-risk forms of engagement. This retreat reflected a rational adaptation to an oppressive context.⁶² Surviving repression and continuing activities albeit on a much smaller scale was perceived as the main goal.

Gradually, it became possible to recognize like-minded people by symbolic markers, such as music one listened to or bars one visited. Such nonverbal communication allowed gradual overcoming of social self-isolation and enabling of trust within small communities. These fragmented communities, which respondents called *bubbles*, existed in both private and professional networks, but often in isolation from broader public debate. This inward turn also deepened the fragmentation of civil society: engaged citizens and wider population had fewer opportunities for meaningful public dialogue or the expression of different views. Fear of denunciation and repression discouraged communication beyond these circles and made key political issues, especially the war, undiscussable.⁶³ Jasper suggested that “turning inward is often a way to make the best of bad situation, and to preserve one’s teams as a player despite demoralizing losses. At the extreme, a group can go into abeyance, or survival mode, for a long period, consolidating internal affective bonds with little external impact”.⁶⁴

ANOTHER CHARACTERISTIC of this period was a growing gap between those who left the country and those who remained. Following the start of the full-scale invasion and the consequent partial draft many activists have left the country.⁶⁵ Faced with *being there* and *engagement dilemmas*, those activists who stayed behind or decided to return back to the country after several months in exile for various reasons, made survival their goal. The priority of personal safety, however, was not always accepted by the self-appointed leaders of Russian oppositions in exile as well as some experts,⁶⁶ who blamed activists inside the country and the publics for conformism and compliance:

There were people who said something like: well, if you stay in Russia, you’re paying taxes – and even though, damn it, you can actually not pay taxes, you can even

avoid working altogether – but still, they would say: by paying taxes you support the regime and the war. If you stay in Russia, it means you’re an enemy of Ukraine.

(PN, an urban activist, big city)

The quote demonstrates how moral blame can be weaponized within diaspora activist communities during wartime. The speaker suggests that some members of the diaspora interpret an activist’s return to Russia as a moral violation and, by extension, as a form of complicity in the war. This framing turns survival decisions into politically charged moral acts and expands the boundaries of responsibility far beyond direct participation in state violence. For the speaker, this attribution of blame becomes a secondary moral shock, producing distress and alienation from diaspora communities abroad.

THIS REVEALS an emotional tension between competing injustice frames. For activists who remained in Russia, living there or returning does not necessarily imply complicity: survival under repression cannot be equated with support for the regime. For some members of the diaspora, however, staying in or returning to Russia is read as morally compromised. These competing interpretations create conflict among civil society actors in exile and inside the country as they

struggle to define the boundaries of responsibility and blame.

By extending moral culpability to those who remain in Russia, regardless of personal risk, resources, or political constraints, this framing encourages shaming and moral policing within exile activist communities. Rather than strengthening transnational civil society, it produced fractures in activist networks, undermined trust and shared purpose, as well as encouraged silence or defensive depoliticization among those who stayed. In Jasper’s terms, these emotional dynamics weakened precisely the affective bonds needed to sustain collective action.

Hope and camaraderie of 2024

The initial wave of emigration in 2022 was driven by acute perceptions of personal danger and the absence of viable forms of public dissent within Russia⁶⁷. However, by the end of 2023 many people, including some civic activists returned: the fear of the partial draft faded, while the wartime conditions gradually normalized presenting various opportunities. Those who returned explained how they resolved the *being there dilemma* as following: limited financial means, language barriers, or employment constraints foreclosed or promptly ended emigration. Others made a deliberate choice to remain or return back to Russia once they recognized that a limited operation was still possible. Many activists justified staying precisely because there was still *room to act*, however narrow.⁶⁸

“FOR ACTIVISTS WHO REMAINED IN RUSSIA, LIVING THERE OR RETURNING DOES NOT NECESSARILY IMPLY COMPLICITY: SURVIVAL UNDER REPRESSION CANNOT BE EQUATED WITH SUPPORT FOR THE REGIME.”

For some activists, the presidential and local elections of 2024 signaled a temporary democratic opening, however small or managed. Participating in elections was legal and therefore considered as low-risk political action compared to street protests. While many activists expressed skepticism toward the current electoral system in Russia, they did not reject elections as an arena where certain gains can be achieved altogether. Rather than viewing elections as pathways to actual political power, particularly in tightly controlled cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, activists frame electoral participation in the language of gains and opportunities to signal dissent, learn new skills and mobilize supporters:

First of all, I believe that Nadezhdin's campaign was definitely not in vain. Election observation is valuable experience. I can now talk about it and say that I have experience and knowledge as an observer; perhaps it will be useful if I run as a municipal deputy candidate. It was enormous experience. I completed several training sessions: there were trainings with 'Observers of [city] N,' and there were trainings in Nadezhdin's campaign headquarters.

(AN, an architect and political activist, big city)

This evidence reflects the importance of small gains under restrictive conditions. The respondent identifies training, participation in the campaign, and practical knowledge received as meaningful outcomes, which help sustain agency and prepare activists for future opportunities. The same enthusiastic activist still held out hope in September 2024 that opposition candidates can win, which motivated them to run for the office themselves:

If everything had gone well and our team had been elected – as we were running – and had gained a majority in the municipality, then we would have been able to approve the budget and at least understand where the money was going. These are direct, on-the-ground consequences for the lives of our districts. For me, this was the main motivation.

(AN, an architect and political activist, big city)

There was an understanding, however, that manipulations are pervasive. Therefore, the elections were approached with the intention of gaining experiences and visibility:

The second motivation was to look at politics more generally, to touch it just a little, carefully, and see where one could move next. Because perhaps – I hope – something will still change in the country in the coming years. Then it might be possible to run not only at the municipal level, but maybe for the Legislative Assembly.

(AN, an architect and political activist, big city)

Initiatives such as the Noon Against Putin campaign during the 2024 presidential election illustrate how electoral events can be



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Boris Nadezhdin and Dmitry Kisiev on October 6, 2023.

reappropriated for symbolic collective action, where visibility is seen as one of the most valuable gains.⁶⁹ In this case, citizens were encouraged to vote at the same time of day, creating a synchronized and public gesture of disapproval. These actions, while unlikely to affect electoral outcomes, offer participants a rare opportunity to feel politically present and to connect with others who share their stance. As one activist put it:

The goal is not to win – we don't believe in victory anymore, which reflects our distrust in the institutions. We know we won't make it through all the filters. Running a campaign only makes sense if it helps us share our message and get more people involved.

(MR, a political activist, big city)

The initial enthusiasm and hope, which characterized the period around presidential elections, were replaced with apathy and disillusionment when Boris Nadezhdin was not allowed to run in the presidential elections: “When the Nadezhdin campaign ended, we were in a state of apathy” (ER, a political activist, big city). However, this electoral loss was quickly transformed into a gain as new experiences could be used shortly after in a local campaign. As a result, for several activists who previously were not involved into electoral politics before, the presidential campaign of Boris Nadezhdin (the only anti-war candidate), became a trampoline into oppositional politics: “Thanks to the Nadezhdin headquarters I ended up in the municipal campaign (ER, a political activist, big city). This is a good example of how emotions and perceived gains and losses guide the shifts in civic actions: from initial apathy and hopelessness that ended in temporary demobilization immediately after the elections, the candidates who collectively resolved not to give up, and mobilized again in a manner of few months. Even though the results of the local elections of 2024 were discouraging: those political activists who were lucky enough to get elected several years before were either banned from entering the field or lost, some respondents noted that both

the presidential elections and the local elections allowed them to overcome isolation and build a sense of camaraderie:

The community was amazing! It was mostly young people, although there were also some older participants. Most of them had backgrounds in political science [...]. It was interesting to talk to everyone. They were smart and well-read. Later, we travelled to [city] N together. We continued working together in [city] N during the elections. Many of us served as election observers, including me.

(AN, an architect and political activist, big city)

The quote highlights the formation of community as a key gain of electoral mobilization, as it created a space where politically like-minded people could meet and recognize one another as part of a wider civic community. This enthusiastic description reflects the emotional reward of participation, suggesting that mobilization generated positive affect and provided motivation to be politically active.

Waiting mode amid uncertainty and fear in 2025–2026

The hopes associated with 2025 did not materialize. Instead, activists largely organized their action around personal risk management. The respondents name *caution* as a strategy shaped by changing political opportunities and by the dilemmas they face under increasing repression:

Why are we becoming more cautious? I think we are simply observing the general practice. [...] Let's be more careful. (NT, an event organizer, big city)

The interviewed activists perceived the environment as increasingly unpredictable. The enforcement of laws on “foreign agents,” “extremists,” and “terrorists,” especially through the retroactive logic of the *continuing offence*, narrowed the space for visible collective action.⁷⁰ Activities that had once seemed ordinary, such as donations, reposts of events, photographs in social media, contacts with well-known political activists, or even the rental of space for events, could later be reinterpreted as evidence of wrongdoing. In this context, repression did not only operate through direct punishment. It also worked through uncertainty. As activists could not know in advance which actions might become dangerous, the safest strategy appeared to be non-involvement:

We are much more careful, more cautious [...] You cannot predict whether something will be considered dangerous or not, so there is no point in taking risks!

(AA, an event organizer)

Security forces increased surveillance of independent civic actors, attended events and intimidate activists by summoning them for informal conversations:

At one point, we even got the impression that in N (city), almost every other person had personally been interrogated or had some kind of contact with the FSB. (KI, a political activist, big city)

Fearing for their life and freedom the activists largely avoided actions that might trigger punishment. As it is seen from the quotations, fear turned into routine avoidance: people declined invitations, refused visibility, or stayed away from potentially controversial activities *just in case*. This uncertainty produced what Jasper would describe as engagement dilemma and extension dilemma: activists had to decide whether participation in or supporting public initiatives could still produce useful outcomes, or whether the risks outweighed any possible gains.⁷¹ The venue owner's refusal to host an initiative, even without publicity, illustrates this clearly. The decision was not necessarily driven by political disagreement, but by the anticipated costs of association:

I am cautious, very cautious. I definitely do not want to engage with anything involving particularly loud or provocative statements. For example, [an initiative] approached us saying: ‘Could we use your space? We can even do it without any publicity or announcements,’ but I still do not want to be involved, because it could [negatively] affect me in some way [...]. It is simply caution. Caution and, I suppose, a reluctance to make my life more complicated.

(AA, an event organizer, big city)

However, in some cities opportunities for civic action did not disappear completely. Rather, they became dependent on activists' ability to read informal boundaries set by the state. When activists avoided crossing perceived *red lines*, local administrations or police could sometimes ignore independent civic initiatives. We would not suggest treating such instances as formal openings, but rather viewing them as zones of permission: activists could still act, provided their actions did not attract federal attention or appear to *rock the boat*.

Even though action possible in some cases, it was also psychologically exhausting. Activists had to constantly interpret signals from officials and security services. The quotation about seeing a possible officer from the Main Directorate for Countering Extremism on a bus captures this emotional condition:

I am travelling by a bus, and someone who looks like an officer from the Center E [center combating extremism] enters. I look at him and think if it is him, or am I imagining it? You are constantly wondering whether it is paranoia or not; it is not clear.

(KA, a political activist, big city)

Fear, which became the dominant everyday emotion, had negatively affected on solidarity among civic activists. Cooperation weakened because contact with stigmatized individuals, groups,

or initiatives could later be interpreted as evidence of disloyalty or even linked to extremism. In this climate any sensitive political discussion as before retreated to narrow circles of trust. The trend of the previous years, when activists avoided discussing the war, repression or politics continued into the beginning of 2026. Partially a security practice and partially an emotional strategy, this avoidance of discussing politics helped to prevent conflicts.

Faced with the Janus and extension dilemma, activists had to decide whether to turn inward, protecting their communities from fragmentation, or outward, articulating clearer political positions and building broader opposition. The inward turn preserved relationships but reduced publicly expressing their opinions. It also involved the *naughty-or-nice dilemma*: more confrontational speech could express moral clarity, but it could not only provoke repression, but also alienate ambivalent participants or break fragile alliances. Many organizers therefore have chosen silence around divisive topics to be able to talk to others for the sake of maintaining social ties:

We are all in the same pot, and there is nowhere to go. So, we have to communicate [...]. Everyone understands, but people try to avoid this topic [war in Ukraine] and never discuss it. Even within the community, these issues are not raised, apparently to avoid internal conflicts and arguments over differing views.
(AA, an event organizer, big city)

The avoidance of political discussion aligns with findings from other research on activist practices, showing that participants sometimes deliberately refrain from discussing the war to enable continued collaboration.⁷² Avoiding politics also allows to build wider alliances based on the minimal consensus with individuals and groups who express other views, which resembles strategic depoliticization of eco-initiatives working with waste, who could “cooperate with any political force as long as they are aligned with the movement in terms of environmental issues.”⁷³ There is also another side to this strategic depoliticization – to appear apolitical allowed initiatives to continue operating in Russia while reducing the likelihood of repression:

Everything related to any form of (public) activity in our case is now – at least for us personally – apolitical, that is, entirely apolitical.
(KA, a curator, big city)

Remaining active required activists to accept forms of action that were less explicitly political and less confrontational: “I think one needs to move into this less politicized sphere. In my view, the goal of civil society now is to preserve itself. And to do that, you need to step back” (NT, a political activist and an event organizer). In constrained conditions, the goal is to survive and if they manage to do so, it would already count as a victory: “I see my mission as protecting the people [...] and maintaining connections between people for future interaction. Preserving

hope, so that neither others nor I lose motivation” (NL, a political activist, big city).

Activists described this state as a *waiting mode*: a strategic suspension of visible action while maintaining minimal conditions for future activity. The dominant goal is survival of people, networks, but also values and basic social trust. Fear as a dominant emotion disabled visible political activity and constrained mass mobilization, but it did not completely eliminated agency.

Concluding remarks

In this article I tried to draw a complex picture of transformations of civil society in Russia starting from February 2022 and until February 2026. These four long years hardly show a linear degradation, rather a trajectory towards in-ward survival with ups and downs along the way. While some periods, such as time around Boris Nadezhdin campaign and local elections in 2024 present the time full of hope and camaraderie, political mobilization and upheaval, other, such as after the announcement of the partial draft and ahead of the parliamentary election – dread and attempts to turn inwards. However, despite the fear and sense of uselessness, activists interviewed in this article still see opportunities to carry out meaningful work even though it has to be presented in depoliticized light. Finding people who share similar values and building networks of solidarity with others based on the minimum consensus provides incentive for engagement. Against all odds, certain gains however small, could be observed since 2022. They include the survival of grass-root solidarity, to a large extent enabled by the ability of activists to recalibrate their strategies depending on the existing risks. At the same time, the collapse of mass protest in 2022, increased social fragmentation, growing self-censorship and emotional exhaustion by 2026 resulted in a broader political demobilization, as the state’s use of legal ambiguity and violence increased the costs of engagement. ✖

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Acknowledgement: The empirical material was collected by Elisa Marin and Oliver Skye, who also run a preliminary thematic analysis of the data.

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Lessons of unfreedom:
“People live in a kind
of limbo, where rules are
both rigid and arbitrary”

In this interview the role of dissidents and the civil society in exile is discussed. Life under the current regime is compared with life during the Soviet-period: there are similarities and differences in the repressive apparatus and the methods and strategies for resistance.

by **Elisa Marin** and **Oliver Skye**

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his is an interview with an anonymous Russian researcher recorded in the winter of 2023, in response to events taking place in the Russian Federation.

Life under the Soviet and current regimes

INTERVIEWERS (I): You have experienced both the Soviet Union and Putin's regime. Are there any similarities?

RESPONDER (R): Yes, I'm almost 70 years old. Well, the current regime did not begin in 2014, of course. It began, in my opinion, with the adoption of the doctrine of information security in 2001. This can be considered the end of the liberal period in the history of Russia, the so-called Yeltsin period. After 2001, things only got worse. Many people remember the takeover of the NTV channel¹ and the ban on the program *Puppets*.² This is when censorship was gradually introduced. And this is where we are today. Does it look to you like the Soviet Union? If you look from abroad, many things might seem similar such as censorship and repression. However, pointing to repression and censorship alone does not explain whether the Soviet regime and Putin's regime today are genuinely comparable. I would say that the differences are stronger!

In the Soviet Union, there was a clear demarcation line between what could and could not be said. In the official discourse – that is, in the newspaper, at a meeting or at a rally – you couldn't say much. In private life, you could say whatever you liked and as long as it did not become public, you could stay under the radar. This situation, marked by a tacit understanding of what was permitted and prohibited, and where and when, emerged in the 1950s in the kitchens of the intelligentsia and persisted into the 1980s, until Yuri Andropov's tightening of the regime. This tacit understanding became part of everyday life: people might complain about the authorities on public transport or,



PHOTO: OLEG NIKSHIN/NEWSMAKERS

Life size puppets of Russian political leaders on the set of a popular satirical television show called “Kukly” (Puppets). “Kukly” was a TV show which mocked Russian political scene on the Independent Channel NTV. The programme was banned in 2002.

especially, while standing in queues. At the same time, they were acutely aware of the boundaries: what could be said and where, and what could not.

Today, the situation is different: there are no unwritten rules people can follow to stay safe when speaking out. Moreover, the boundaries between the public and the private sphere became blurred. Instead, people live in a kind of limbo, where rules are both rigid and arbitrary. This is why under Putin’s regime, many have stopped trying to orient themselves: insecurity is constant, and fear is spreading.

The Soviet government demanded public displays of unity and loyalty to the Party. How people actually lived in private mattered far less. They could steal or lie, and many did, so long as they did not make a public spectacle of it. Above all, especially abroad, they were not to say anything that was forbidden. Dissidents were therefore unwelcome and were persecuted, because they tried to bring real problems into the open. They wanted to speak about them publicly. That, more than anything else, was what the regime found dangerous.

I: Who exactly were these dissidents?

R: If, as the Soviet phrase *inakomyslyashchie* suggests, “half the country thought differently,” *dissidents* were those who also acted differently (*inakodeistvuyushchie*). They were the people who insisted that the authorities follow their own laws. And, to some extent, legality did exist, especially compared with today. Even in cases labeled “crimes against the state” (for example, distributing so-called anti-Soviet literature), it was sometimes possible to be cleared of the charges. Today, by contrast, it is hard to hope for a fair trial at all.

A joke from the Stalin era captures the logic: a new prisoner is asked: “How much did you get?” – “Five years.” – “For what?” – “For nothing!” – “No, they give ten *for nothing!*” The situation in Russia today can feel even more



The interactive exhibition “Erica Takes Four Copies” opened 2022, at the Anna Akhmatova Museum in Fountain House. The main object is manuscripts, or rather, printed copies – *samizdat*.



Russian *samizdat*: photo negatives of unofficial literature.

PHOTO: NKRITA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

shocking: today you can get twenty years “for nothing”. In that sense, it is harder for dissidents today. As Boris Slutsky wrote in his well-known poem, “we all walk under God” (meaning that no one is safe from such misfortune – *editor’s note*). Today no one, even a loyal citizen, can be sure what might trigger prosecution. Someone might say the wrong thing in the wrong setting, or simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that can already be enough. This is the condition under which people are forced to act.

Samizdat, underground and methods of resistance in the USSR

I: How did the dissidents act? What were the risks?

R: First of all, there was a huge underground world. It’s no accident that my generation is sometimes called “the generation of janitors and watchmen.” People left officially prestigious jobs such as engineers, scientists, researchers, and took the type of work typical of dissidents: writing texts. Many wrote poetry and prose. They published almanacs and underground *samizdat* journals. Of course, it was a form of struggle. But this underground world was so large that it was possible, in a sense, to live inside it without “drawing attention” from the state. What did the dissidents do there? The first thing that stands out is that a new culture was developing. There were underground exhibitions; philosophical, linguistic, and architectural seminars, not at universities, but in private apartments, where entry was by password. There were also many Marxist circles that tried to practice what they considered “genuine” Marxism. I think the KGB knew a great deal about all of this. But if it didn’t become public, it was sometimes tolerated until, suddenly, it wasn’t, and people were arrested. Politically, this mostly concerned *samizdat*.

Beyond the well-known protests, like the 1968 demonstrations in Red Square,³ there were leaflets and underground literature in general. Especially important was the relatively regular publication of the *Chronicle of Current Events*.⁴ It informed people about repressions, strikes, and other events. Often only ten copies were produced, typed on thin paper. There was a saying then about the typewriter: “Erika takes four copies”⁵ (meaning the *Erika* typewriter could produce several copies at once – *editor’s note*). There was no Internet at the time.

I: Typewriters often had distinctive typefaces and/or serial numbers. Is it correct that it allowed authorities to identify the machine from a typed document?

R: Yes, absolutely. And I say this ironically. Before a weekend or holiday, all the typewriters at the institute would be sealed. A “trial font” [a reference typing sample – *editor’s note*] was taken from each machine and kept in the so-called First Department [the office responsible for security and secrecy – *editor’s note*]. That way [if a suspicious document appeared – *editor’s note*] it was easy to determine which typewriter had produced it. So of course, typing on official typewriters was very risky, but some people managed to get their own machines. During house searches, the authorities would immediately take a sample and check whether it matched any of the typed materials they

were investigating. In general, distributing anything was difficult and dangerous, and people used all kinds of ingenious methods, some of them almost unbelievable. People were so inventive! New restrictions were quickly worked around, because for every new rule there were always plenty of people who could think up some technical trick to get around it.

I: So it was basically the same technological struggle, just in analog form. Today, of course, it's all digital.

R: Yes, of course!

Denunciations, recruitment, and the repressive apparatus in the USSR and in current Russia

I: How did Soviet dissidents deal with the risk of denunciations, that is to being reported to the authorities? And how did they vet or screen people so that only trusted participants were present at apartment gatherings where literature was shared or distributed?

R: There are estimates suggesting that, under Stalin, the USSR saw as many as four million denunciations. Something similar happened in the Third Reich. In one German book I read about denunciations and the author noted that the Gestapo was relatively small in terms of staff. It didn't need to be larger: ordinary people supplied the denunciations themselves.

And we see echoes of this today. On the metro, someone glances at a neighbor's phone, notices a Ukrainian flag, and reports it immediately. The person is detained, and a case is quickly fabricated. I know a teacher who was asked by students what she thought about the current situation, and she answered honestly. When she returned to the staff room, the police were already waiting for her. The students had recorded the conversation and sent it to the police. Teachers inform on students; students inform on teachers...

In the late Soviet Union, denunciations did not function all that effectively. The KGB collected them and often simply kept them on file in case someone needed to be prosecuted in the future. It was also officially stated that anonymous denunciations would not be considered.

I worked at a research institute, and we had informers there, probably quite a few. In academic circles, it was believed that every fourth or fifth person was an informer, as a massive recruitment campaign was underway. At that time, the repressive machine struck rarely and selectively, targeting individuals only when they had truly crossed all the "red lines," as the saying goes – when they "no longer knew the limits." So people calmly told dangerous jokes, knowing there were informers around. In today's Russia, that is clearly not advisable.

I: So when someone takes information from the private sphere into the public one, they are effectively crossing that very line and it becomes an open threat?

R: Yes, of course. But even then, the sentences were not that harsh. I received a suspended sentence for distributing "anti-Soviet" literature. Today, however, I have not heard of suspended sentences being given. Instead, people receive real prison terms: eight to ten years, sometimes even twenty.

I: That's obvious intimidation.

R: Yes, of course. At least the Soviet Union tried to appear somewhat respectable.

I: How were people recruited by security services?

R: Recruitment worked very well. They usually targeted people who had some kind of "sin" – for example, telling political jokes. They have attempted to recruit me too. I was summoned to the "First Department." There was no point playing games with them. At best, it would end in a draw. Recruitment involves both threats ("We know a lot about you") and incentives ("We'll help you; you'll receive certain benefits"). They told me: "You speak German? Excellent. We'll place you in the USSR-FRG Society. You will report to us on who says what". I should have told them to get lost immediately; instead, I did so on the third day, realizing that the longer it went on, the worse it would become. So the correct approach was: "Sorry, this isn't for me". There were no consequences for that. At least in the Soviet Union, refusal did not lead to repression. Even better was to make the recruitment attempt widely known as there was a good chance they would quickly back off.

Today the same recruitment patterns are used. At the institute where I now work, I know of at least four people who have been approached. The main thing is not to give in to fear, but to refuse categorically. Better still, to open

“And we see echoes of this today. On the metro, someone glances at a neighbor's phone, notices a Ukrainian flag, and reports it immediately. The person is detained, and a case is quickly fabricated.”

the door and say loudly: “Don’t you dare try to recruit me. Who do you think I am?” Nothing will happen. They will simply add a note to your file: “Refused recruitment.” Of course, if you are arrested later, that note may also be used.

I: In everyday life, did people simply assume that there were informers in every organization? Was that just taken for granted?

R: I can only speak about what I personally saw and the environment I was part of. At the institute, it was known that several people were informers. One of them did not even deny it. He was quite demonstrative about it and was at one point the party secretary. People laughed at him. They even told him political jokes directly. He was a rather small, resentful person even though he held a Candidate of Sciences degree. In the end, people got used to it. They accepted that there was always a certain risk, but no one took it too seriously unless someone began acting openly in dissent, for example by reproducing and distributing materials.

Political jokes and parallel society

I: By the way, what role did political jokes play for people in the USSR?

R: First of all, people laughed. I think nothing is harder for a regime than being laughed at, when it is no longer taken seriously. Everyone assumed Soviet power would last forever, and somehow one had to compensate for the life that had been imposed on us. Political humour reached extraordinary heights. Collections of political jokes were published in samizdat. The same was true in Eastern Europe.

In the USSR, there was a cultural underground, but there was no “parallel society,” like the one that emerged in Poland. During the period of martial law under Wojciech Jaruzelski,⁶ people have created a parallel public sphere with its own institutions, newspapers, financial structures, even consumer goods. All under the slogan: “No contacts with the state.” I was in Poland at the time and was astonished by the scale of it. A friend of mine, a well-known

journalist at *Gazeta Wyborcza*, gave me a large collection of samizdat material. Unlike in the USSR, where such texts were produced on primitive equipment, these were printed in excellent printing houses.

I: How was that possible? Where was the state looking?

R: Apparently, there comes a critical mass when everything can no longer be controlled. It is only individuals that can be picked off one by one. I remember an interview in the 1990s with a police chief in Kaliningrad. He was asked, “What if a thousand people come out to protest?” “We’ll detain them,” he said. “And if it’s a hundred thousand?” “Then we’ll stand and watch.” “And if it’s a million?” “Then we’ll join the protest.” By that point in Poland, no one was afraid anymore.

It seems to me that this kind of “parallel society” might have been viable in the early Putin years. Today, given the current level of repression, I’m not sure how feasible it is. But I believe one must not cooperate with a criminal state, because in doing so, you become complicit. And this is not

only a moral argument. I would say that any state grant is potentially toxic: especially if someone is determined to find a violation, they almost always can. In that sense, non-cooperation with the state also means not taking any money from it.

I: Some activists argue that what matters is how you spend the money, not where it comes from. State funds are taxpayers’ money; the state has no other source of income. They can be used for good causes, even anti-war ones, if not openly.

R: I would remind them that the money is toxic. I am not a purist. I might even close my eyes to the fact that accepting it is, in effect, supporting the state. But you will suffer for it if not today, then later. And besides, it leaves a stain, even if no public declarations of loyalty are required. We see how some of our colleagues have gone all the way. For example, the head of VCIOM, Valery Fyodorov, receives substantial state funding and says whatever the state requires. I do not believe he is a fool or that he truly believes in what he says. But in effect, he has sold himself to the devil.

At the same time, from an academic point of view, he does some useful things such as supporting the publication of worthwhile books, for instance. Yet he publicly attacks opposition-minded citizens, passionately supports the existing authorities, and helps them manipulate public opinion through mass polling. After so many actions, he becomes someone people refuse to shake hands with. “But there is a Judge – a stern and terrible Judge. He waits [...]”⁷ However, the reckoning may come not from history, but from the very regime he now serves.

“I think nothing is harder for a regime than being laughed at, when it is no longer taken seriously.”



PHOTO: GRANIRU

A memorial protest action on Red Square in Moscow on August 25, 2013, with the banner "For your freedom and ours." The action was held in memory of the 1968 protest.



Doublethink and contemporary challenges in Russia

I: How does today's situation in Russia differ from that of the Soviet Union, when people said one thing publicly, but believed another privately? It seems that people are once again being pushed toward doublethink. However, today many people describe a strong inner resistance and a refusal to make ethical compromises. What do you think about this?

R: Doublethink existed in the Soviet Union. Today, that model no longer quite describes what is happening. Back then, doublethink meant that you knew the boundary and the rules on both sides of life: the official public life and private life. For the state, as in any disciplinary system, what mattered was outward conformity. You could think whatever you wanted, but you were expected to keep those thoughts to yourself and behave as required. Your thoughts were of no interest to anyone!

Today, such doublethink does not exist as there is no clear demarcation line [between the public and the private – *editor's note*!] I have the impression that today's state wants [not only the correct behavior, but – *editor's note*] conformity of thought as well. What we once mocked – "The Introduction of Uniformity of Thought in Russia" by Kozma Prutkov – increasingly looks like a description of reality: people are being, and often quite effectively, made to think in the ready-made formulas of official ideology.

In that sense, those who refuse to comply are being pushed out of the country: either through direct threats or through the creation of an atmosphere so stifling that they choose to leave. And when Dmitry Peskov says that 90% will vote for Vladimir Putin, I assume that perhaps 90% will indeed vote for him, thereby legitimizing his continued rule. But those who might have opposed this either by acting differently, proposing alternatives, or speaking out, are no longer here. They are all elsewhere.

I remember a Soviet joke that played on a famous line from the classic novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky: "The most precious thing a person has is life. It is given to him only once, and he must live it THERE".⁸

"You could think whatever you wanted, but you were expected to keep those thoughts to yourself and behave as required."

So they are all already THERE – in Germany or in other countries – and, alas, more often than not they end up playing the role of the “pique-vested gentlemen”⁹ being poorly informed about what is actually happening in Russia, yet publicly passing judgment on the situation. And the more of these “pique-vested gentlemen” there are, the better it is for the regime in Russia. After all, they are no longer in Russia.

Those who remain in Russia understand a great deal and are capable of acting. So from the authorities’ point of view, it is better to get rid of them. That is why the authorities not only intimidate everyone else, but also push out those who act differently. And if someone does not take the hint, they are given long prison sentences. Not necessarily “for nothing”, [on the contrary – *editor’s note*] they are often imprisoned “for something.” I would stress that the focus should not be on the victims, but on the heroes, on those who act or speak out publicly, risking their own freedom. Such people are pushed out of the country. There [abroad – *editor’s note*], they can say whatever they want, especially since their words may not even reach audiences inside Russia. We know that there is a rapid crackdown on the free internet, with even the threat of a complete shutdown.

The tightening of the regime and disciplinary practices in the USSR and modern Russia

I: You mentioned that the regime tightened under Yuri Andropov’s leadership (1982–1984). What happened during that period?

“Those who remain in Russia understand a great deal and are capable of acting. So from the authorities’ point of view, it is better to get rid of them.”

R: During Andropov’s rule new strategies emerged for combating not only dissent in action, but dissent in thought as well. These strategies involved new disciplinary measures and a systematic purge of the dissent circles. Until then, it had been a relatively calm period for dissidents, with arrests carried out selectively and case by case. In 1982–83, when Andropov came to power many were imprisoned at once, including several prominent figures.

It was during this period that the *Chronicle of Current Events* was finally shut down. New disciplinary measures were also introduced for the population as a whole. If you were supposed to be at work, then you had to be at work. If you were caught in a shop or at the baths during working hours, there were fines, dismissal from your job, and so on. Special patrols went around looking for violators of labor discipline.

I: Why did the regime need this at the time? Was it simply a disciplinary measure for its own sake?

R: No, of course, it was not! The economy was in serious trouble. No one was really investing themselves in their work. I was formally employed at an institute where no one worked, or almost no one. The majority spent their time telling jokes in the smoking room, myself included. It operated in the service of the state. And it felt morally degrading to do what the state required – to validate state policy by showing that “the people” were in favor of it.

I would even say that no one needed or cared about what people wrote in their reports. No one ever read them. Yet enormous amounts of paper were wasted on them. I recall how I slipped a one-ruble note onto about the thirtieth page of our team’s report before it was sent to the institute archive. A month later I went back to check, and the ruble was still there! I wanted to know whether anyone needed any of this at all. It was meaningless work.

Strategies of resistance and the role of dissidents in history and the present

I: How should those who remain in Russia and disagree with the regime’s policies act today? On the one hand, it seems there are more opportunities, thanks to the digital media. On the other hand, even a screenshot from your account can land you in prison for five, ten, or fifteen years. What strategies can be effective? How can one act without ending up behind bars?

R: It seems to me that much of what is happening now is intimidation. Today it is far easier to circumvent restrictions and avoid repression than it was in Soviet times. Back then there were no mobile phones, only landlines. What could you do? During a conversation you might muffle the receiver, cover it with pillows. Or turn on the tap so that the running water would create noise and make eavesdropping more difficult.

We suspected that every socket might have been bugged. There were even jokes about it: “Comrade Major enjoyed your joke.” And, of course, all correspondence was risky. There was no digital communication, no computers at all, so one had to speak in euphemisms. But it was not only about euphemisms; we learned to read between the lines. And it became a real art for journalists, and above all for essayists and political commentators, to write in such

a way that everyone would read between the lines. There were truly outstanding people in this respect; we all knew them by name. We always read them in newspapers that were slightly more liberal than the others. It was a pleasure! And since good newspapers were scarce, people passed those texts from hand to hand.

And this was one way to get around those strict rules: the ability to write and read between the lines. I think many still use this today, but the art is not as developed as it once was. There was a period of freedom when people wrote and read what they wanted and considered it normal. Today, of course, the question is the degree of risk: what will happen if I write openly?

I believe the old dissident slogan – “Do what you must, and let what may be”¹⁰ – is right. However, one has to think carefully about how to act in order to continue one’s work: helping the poor, the sick, the children; or protecting the environment, all of which have become more dangerous, since such efforts may create problems for those in power. One can go out into the square and shout: “Give us freedom!”, and then end up in prison. But what is the point?! You only show that such heroes exist. People who otherwise might have done something more useful, instead end up behind bars.

We understand that the regime will collapse. I hardly know anyone who believes it will last forever, like we once believed the Soviet system would.

I: It seems to me that the authorities themselves do not think so, and that this is precisely why the repression is so harsh. In the Soviet Union, those in power were convinced it would last forever, so they did not feel particularly threatened. They don’t feel sure of anything.

R: Russian propagandists contemptuously label those who are waiting out the current situation “waiters” (*zhduny*). I believe waiting is sometimes necessary, but it should be active waiting: continuing to act, even when your efforts seem unnecessary today, because they may be essential in the “beautiful tomorrow.”

I: So we don’t have to put our whole lives on hold just to fight the regime?

R: The regime will not collapse because of a revolution from below, it is more likely to collapse from above. I do not mean to suggest that scholars can predict such things or that they should; that would be foolish, or at least unscientific. But all signs today suggest it will be the most possible scenario. Given that active people have been pushed out of the country and that there are few who openly act in dissent, the situation is what it is.

Today we may be skeptical of the theory of “small deeds,” but if this is what you know how to do – then do it, keep going. It will be useful later. It will matter. Do something for the society that will emerge after the regime collapses, especially, when so few people are thinking about what comes next. That is why we all need to think about what we will do after the regime’s collapse and what work will prove valuable, even if it seems pointless today.

I can imagine some people saying that we should be doing something today to improve people’s lives. For example, Soviet scholars tried to “improve” life in the country: they would go to those in power and say, “You know, the situation is rather harsh. Let’s allow a bit more freedom, but we’ll set firm boundaries for these new freedoms so that socialism remains eternal. Everyone will be satisfied.” In doing so, they prolonged the regime. In that sense, any work done for the regime, in my view, is wrong. But working for people is legitimate. That’s what one should be doing.

At the same time, one should be afraid. And of course one must take care of one’s own safety. There is already a substantial historical experience of how to avoid repression and persecution. It is worth studying again. Reading books such as *How to Behave During a KGB Interrogation?*, *How to Be a Witness: How to Conduct Yourself During a Search*, or *How to Survive in a Soviet Prison*.¹¹ I am now recalling Soviet samizdat literature. It is still relevant today! It’s even being republished officially, for example, by one of our especially “leftist” publishing houses.

I: Do you think the dissident movement played any role in the collapse of the Soviet regime?

R: Yes, I believe it played an enormous role. There were probably only a few thousand active dissenters trying to do something. But if we’re talking about bringing down the regime through practical actions – then certainly not. What they did was to destroy the symbolic boundary that had been considered sacred, in other words, that tacit understanding between citizens and the state: In private, you can do what you want, but in public, you’re expected to pretend you support it.

If liberals, in effect, strengthened the Soviet regime by making it more humane by merely trying to push the boundary outward and win slightly greater freedoms, then the dissidents simply tore it apart. They demanded that the real problems of society be discussed publicly. I’m not even talking about political issues, when they would say:

“The regime will not collapse because of a revolution from below, it is more likely to collapse from above.”

“You claim to have a democratic system? Then let’s have genuine elections!” Or they put forward political demands: remove the Party’s leadership over the state; introduce a multiparty system; let the Party stop dictating to the state what it must do. And so on.

I: In the end, wasn’t that exactly what the USSR’s transformation under Mikhail Gorbachev looked like, at least at first, before any fundamental change to the regime?

R: Well, that’s how it turned out to be. I assume that at the beginning Gorbachev simply wanted to let off steam and create a more favorable environment for the population, as liberals, including social researchers, had advised. But then the process got out of control, and Gorbachev was not prepared to resort to repression. In that sense, he deserves considerable credit for the fact that the USSR came to an end. Or, as Yurchak once wrote, “It was forever, until it was no more.”¹²

I: If we think about what may come next, and about the role dissidents could play, does that mean it’s important to develop and publicly articulate an alternative agenda, while still avoiding actions that could lead to prison?

R: Yes, I completely agree, especially if we’re careful to avoid unnecessary risks. To be able to live with yourself, you have to approach this rationally. Sometimes my colleagues start to panic, like ordinary citizens caught in a difficult situation. They emigrate or fall into depression. I usually tell them: “Switch on the researcher, the one who doesn’t divide the world into good and bad, and switch off the citizen. Observe. Talk to people. Study what’s happening. Try to understand it.” And the moment you turn even to autoethnography. When you begin studying yourself, the panic begins to subside. You become a social researcher and, for a time, stop being simply a citizen. Put practically: keep a diary. Write, but do it in a way that won’t endanger you if you are detained and your materials are searched. Store it securely (for example, encrypted and backed up in a cloud), rather than keeping an easily readable record on your devices. I would encourage activists to do the same.

Civil society in exile and prospects for future change

I: It seems to me that a lot of bad things have happened because we have been trying for too long to be anything other than citizens: consumers, professionals, but not citizens. This whole situation has shown that when so many people stop being citizens, it becomes impossible to avoid the consequences.

R: Any civic initiative that isn’t approved by the authorities faces risks. In fact, the danger extends beyond merely “unapproved” initiatives: even initiatives not created by the authorities themselves, unlike the various official “people’s fronts”, can be treated as suspect and therefore risky.

The active segment of civil society, pushed out of the country, is gradually losing the ability to do anything inside Russia. Most of them have begun working for themselves, for their own communities forming in exile, in places like Tbilisi, Berlin, Prague, and so on. They help new arrivals from Russia and have created organizations that matter within these new centers of emigration. But for Russia itself, this amounts to nothing. Moreover, those who remain in Russia and continue communicating with such relocated activists risk facing repercussions. The FSB monitors cross-border contacts. In my view, the prospects for civil society in Russia are currently close to zero. Society is being harshly weeded out. What remains, as in the Soviet Union, are public organizations and NGOs that cooperate with the state, or are even created by it (GONGOs), that is, those who demonstrate public loyalty.

I: A bleak picture.

R: Well, bleak, but not for long! Not for long. Let me say it again: there is still plenty to do. I understand that being a human rights defender in Russia today is extremely difficult or almost impossible. Even the lawyers who used to assist in human rights cases have been pushed out. But not everyone is involved in human rights work. Environmental activists are still trying to do something. Although the authorities have even labeled salmon protection activists as “foreign agents”! We are living in a world of absurdity. It seems absurd from our point of view; from the authorities’ perspective, perhaps not. Everything is being systematically dismantled. And in that sense, I am genuinely curious how they will later justify why they did all this. It will be very interesting.

I: I suppose one can look to what happened after Nazi Germany (the Third Reich) and after the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for guidance.

R: Today, even comparing something to the Third Reich is a criminal offense. Just making the comparison, that alone can be prosecuted!

People often complain that ties are being severed. But I see civil society as something that is not national in character, it is global. All these borders should simply be disregarded. You don't need to see these borders in order to do something together. I'm speaking for myself as I don't see them. The Russian state, on the contrary, is trying to reinforce these borders, perhaps even to seal them off for civic activists who remain inside the country, in order to cut off the flow of fresh blood to the organism so that it withers away.

In that sense, civil society is alive. But those who remain in Russia are in a far more difficult position. We need to think about how to do something together, to the extent that this is still possible. Even simply traveling somewhere for a seminar and exchanging experience can already be useful – to Yerevan, or Tbilisi, or Berlin. Though Berlin is already more complicated...

I: So it's not entirely pointless, after all, to organize joint events?

R: It creates a sense that we haven't been abandoned. Because you really can learn something there, establish new connections that may prove useful. All the organizations that still exist today but have lost access to funding inside Russia, and do not risk, or do not wish to take state grants (which, in my view, is the right decision) – still need to survive. And of course they find ways. Very different ways. The logistics of how such funding is obtained are extremely complicated.

I: We won't go into details.

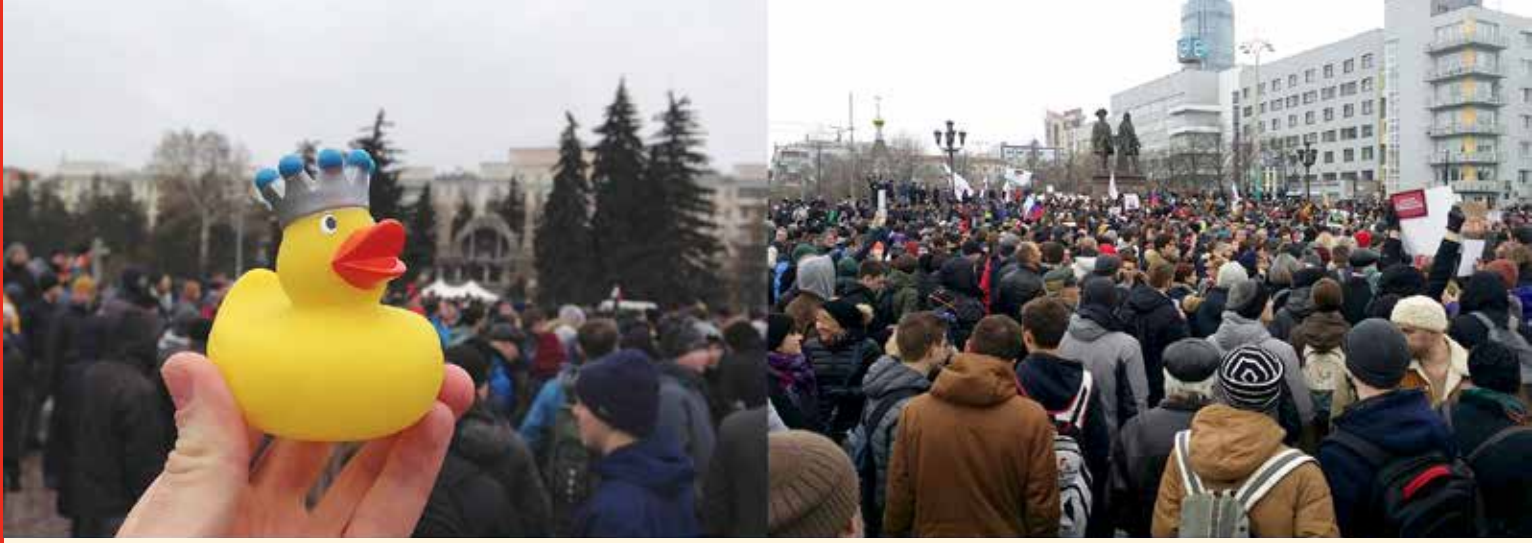
R: No, of course not. Besides, everyone probably guesses how it works, but you still have to catch someone red-handed. You constantly have to think. Imagine you are living in the Third Reich during wartime. If someone invites you somewhere – just say: “thank you”.

I: I think we can end on this optimistic note. ✕

Elisa Marin and Oliver Skye are pseudonyms used for safety reasons by two researchers who regularly conduct fieldwork inside Russia.

references

- 1 The 1999–2003 transfer of NTV channel to Gazprom-Media led to changes in its editorial policy and staff. These events are also known as the “NTV Case” or the “Dispute of Business Entities”.
- 2 A satirical TV program on NTV (1994–2002) that used puppet dolls to portray politicians and public figures.
- 3 This refers to the dissidents' protest on Red Square in Moscow on August 25, 1968, against the entry of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia and the suppression of the Prague Spring. It remains one of the most striking examples of open civil protest in the late Soviet period.
- 4 *Chronicles of Current Events* was an illegal samizdat bulletin published in the USSR from 1968 to 1982. It became the main source of information on repressions, trials, dissident persecution, and human rights activity in the country.
- 5 “Erika Takes Four Copies” symbolizes the desire for freedom of speech and information in the face of censorship typical of the Soviet era. The typewriter “Erika” has become a symbol of samizdat and is immortalized in a poem *We're No Worse Than Horace* (Мы не хуже Горация) by Alexander Galich, written around 1966.
- 6 Refer to the events in Poland in 1981, when General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law. Its primary aim was to suppress the growing activity of the independent trade union Solidarity (Solidarność), led by Lech Wałęsa. Martial law was accompanied by mass arrests, the introduction of censorship, restrictions on civil liberties, a ban on public gatherings, and strict control over society.
- 7 A quote from a poem by Mikhail Lermontov – *The Death of a Poet* (1837).
- 8 The original quote from the novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky *How the Steel Was Tempered* is: “The most precious thing a person has is life. It is given to him once, and it must be lived in such a way that it is not excruciatingly painful for the years spent aimlessly[...].”
- 9 “Pique Vests” is an allusion to the characters in the novel *The Twelve Chairs* by Ilf and Petrov, who sit on a bench and endlessly talk about politics, economics and the fate of the world, while possessing neither real knowledge nor influence. The expression has since become a mildly derisive term for a self-assured dilettante – someone convinced of his exceptional insight and eager to play the role of a political expert.
- 10 The phrase “Do what you must, and come what may” (Latin: *Fac quod debes, fiat quod potest/fiat quod vis*) appeared in samizdat publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s, together with the *Chronicle of Current Events* and protest letters, and became a moral principle for dissidents. It expressed the idea of inner freedom, honesty, and responsibility to one's conscience, even in the face of pressure, fear, and the apparent hopelessness of changing the system. It was an ethical formula of resistance.
- 11 The works of Vladimir Albrecht – a Soviet writer, dissident, member of the human rights movement of the 1960s–1980s, and political prisoner (1983–1987) – are listed here. He was one of the founders of the human rights organization “Group-73,” which assisted political prisoners and individuals persecuted for political reasons.
- 12 The phrase comes from Alexei Yurchak's book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005) and became a concise expression of the paradox of the late Soviet era.



From left: Protests in Chelyabinsk, March 2017. The rubber duck became a symbol of the anti-corruption protests. Rally in Yekaterinburg.

Is civil society in Russia really dead?

Changing landscape of Russian civic activism amidst the war with Ukraine by **Irina Meyer Olimpieva**

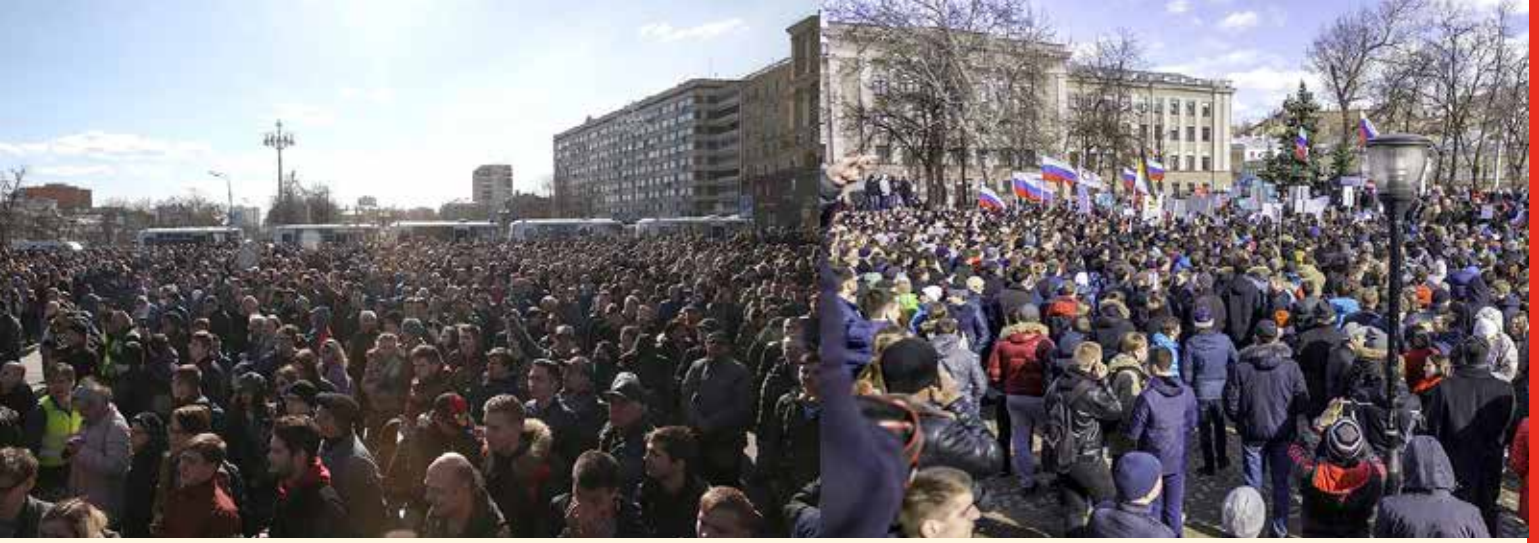
abstract

This article examines the transformation of Russian civil society since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on empirical research—including case studies, interviews with civic actors, and digital ethnography—it identifies divergent trajectories across civil society’s institutional and grassroots segments. While politicized and formalized organizations have experienced sharp repression and decline, grassroots initiatives have expanded, often adopting informal, decentralized, and digital forms. These shifts do not indicate the death of civil society but rather its adaptation to an increasingly authoritarian context. The article argues that the war has acted as an accelerant to long-standing trends: the erosion of institutional influence, the growing dominance of state-controlled funding, and the rise of localized, informal civic engagement. At the same time, the article critiques the limitations of normative, democracy-centered models of civil society, which tend to equate civic vitality with political opposition and formal organization and proposes a more pluralistic and context-sensitive approach to analyzing civil society in non-democratic regimes..

KEYWORDS: Russian civil society, grassroots initiatives, authoritarianism, repression.

This article is motivated by a narrative widely circulated among Russia experts: that following the outbreak of war and the escalation of political repression, Russian civil society has effectively “died.” Some commentators have gone so far as to describe the civic landscape as a barren desert.¹ These assessments typically point to the political persecution and emigration of key opposition leaders, the dissolution of major civil society organizations, and the perceived loss of independence among those that remain, now seen as entirely subordinated to the state. In our view, such assessments are overly categorical and rest on a narrow conceptualization of civil society, overlooking its inherent heterogeneity and the diversity of civic activism.

The goal of this article is to analyze changes in the configuration of Russian civil society and forms of civic activism since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To do so, I draw on a variety of data collected through recent studies on civic activism in wartime Russia. These include internet-based analysis as well as empirical research conducted at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies. The first study maps the diverse and often covert forms of Russian anti-war resistance.² The sec-



The largest rally that took place in Moscow, March 26. Protests in Nizhny Novgorod.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

and investigates informal volunteer networks assisting Ukrainian refugees stranded in Russia and attempting to reach Europe.³ In addition, this article incorporates data from the interviews with four leaders of Russian NGOs, conducted at various points after the war began.

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature, highlighting critical biases embedded in the dominant normative approach to civil society. In particular, it critiques the prevailing “democracy bias” and emphasizes the need to account for both the diversity of civic engagement and the political conditions under which civic initiatives operate. Building on these critiques, the next section proposes a segmentation model for analyzing Russian civil society, distinguishing four segments based on their levels of institutionalization and politicization, and tracing how each has evolved since the onset of the war.

THE FOLLOWING SECTION outlines the broader features of wartime Russian civil society, identifying three key characteristics: the absence of institutional political influence, the rising prominence of grassroots initiatives amid the decline of formal organizations, and the increasingly informal, digital, and often invisible nature of civic activism. I argue that these traits did not emerge solely as a reaction to the war but reflect a longer-term trajectory of authoritarian transformation that began with Vladimir Putin’s consolidation of power. The war has served primarily as an accelerant of these preexisting trends.

In the discussion, I suggest that declarations of the “death” of Russian civil society reflect inflated expectations shaped by a normative, democracy-centric model – particularly the “dissident” model that equates civic legitimacy with open opposition to the state.

The conclusion summarizes the findings and reflects on the

need to revise dominant conceptual frameworks of civil society in order to better analyze civic engagement under authoritarian regimes.

Heterogeneity and diversity of civil societies

The concept of civil society is complex and often contradictory; it is better understood as an umbrella term that can be conceptualized in multiple ways, making it difficult to operationalize for specific analysis. This conceptual ambiguity leads to significant discrepancies in expert assessments of the state and effectiveness of civil society, as analysts apply different frameworks. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of approaches and interpretations, a particular normative understanding of civil society has taken shape in the scholarly literature over recent decades – one that defines what civil society is supposed to be and what its principal function ought to entail.⁴ Although a growing body of work has emerged in recent years challenging these idealized views, this normative perspective continues to exert significant influence over perceptions of civil society, both within the academic community and among policymakers and journalists.

In this section, drawing on works that critique the dominant view of civil society, I argue that the normative conceptualization of civil society exhibits at least three key biases. First, it presumes a direct and essential relationship between civil society and democracy, particularly the expectation that civil society should explicitly promote and defend democratic values. Second, it largely overlooks how civil society functions in authoritarian contexts, where interaction with the state is shaped by coercion, cooptation, and mutual dependency. Third, it overemphasizes formal, professionalized organizations while neglecting informal and grassroots initiatives, including

“THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IS COMPLEX AND OFTEN CONTRADICTORY; IT IS BETTER UNDERSTOOD AS AN UMBRELLA TERM THAT CAN BE CONCEPTUALIZED IN MULTIPLE WAYS, MAKING IT DIFFICULT TO OPERATIONALIZE FOR SPECIFIC ANALYSIS.”

emerging hybrid and semi-formal civic practices. These three dimensions are deeply interrelated and cannot be analyzed in isolation. Addressing them is critical for understanding how civil society is evaluated – particularly in non-democratic contexts such as Russia. This critique also facilitates the development of a more context-sensitive working definition of civil society, which guides our analysis of its transformation in Russia after 2022. As a starting point, I adopt the classic definition of civil society as the public sphere that exists between the state, market, and private life, in which citizens organize collectively.

Civil society and democratic ideals

In political theory and empirical studies alike, civil society is often regarded as both a foundation for and a prerequisite of democracy. The idealized model of civil society rooted in liberal views of classical scholars is seen as providing spaces where citizens can articulate interests, mobilize around common causes, hold the state accountable, and resist authoritarian tendencies. Through participation in civil associations, individuals develop civic skills and democratic norms, creating a vibrant “public sphere” necessary for democracy to flourish. This public sphere, mediated by civil society, acts as a bridge between the private lives of individuals and the formal institutions of the state, enabling the articulation of public opinion and the formation of collective will.⁵

This association is even more pronounced in policy discourse, where the concept of civil society is routinely equated to the democracy-building process. In this framework, civil society is not merely seen as a space for public engagement but a key actor in resisting authoritarianism, advancing human rights, and fostering democratic governance. Such assumptions, however, rest on a narrow understanding of civil society – one that casts it primarily as an instrument for liberal reform and resistance.

This raises a critical question: Is the concept of civil society primarily a tool for democratic change, or can it serve as an analytical lens for understanding diverse forms of collective organization across political regimes? Scholars have long questioned the universal applicability of the liberal-democratic model, especially in authoritarian and non-Western contexts.⁶

ANOTHER IMPORTANT issue is whether any form of collective civic activism – regardless of their ideological orientation – fall in the scope of civil society, or only those aligned with progressive, democratic ideals. Since the late 1990s, researchers have increasingly focused on types of public activism labeled as “uncivil”, “anti-democratic”, “illiberal”, or simply as manifestations of “bad civil society.” The challenge of delineating and conceptualizing what is truly “civil” often leads to a simplified dichotomy, where “good” civil society is associated with progressive values,

and uncivil activism is attributed to right-wing, anti-immigrant groups that promote racist, sexist, homophobic, or other exclusionary ideologies.⁷

Political context and Interactions with the State

Another key blind spot in normative models is the failure to account for the political context in which civil society operates. The structure of political opportunity fundamentally shapes the forms, goals, and survival strategies of civic actors. While civil society in liberal democracies often maintains a degree of autonomy from the state, this is rarely the case under authoritarian rule – a fact well documented in comparative research on civil society in hybrid and non-democratic regimes.⁸

IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS, civic organizations often engage in complex relationships with the state, marked by simultaneous cooperation and constraint. Civil society actors may provide essential services or perform socially useful functions, even as they are co-opted, surveilled, or instrumentalized by the state. In such regimes, full independence is rarely possible; civic organizations must navigate a political environment in which

state control is the default. Frolic⁹ describes this dynamic as a “dual civil society,” distinguishing between state-sponsored and grassroots-driven segments of civic activity.

Research on civil societies in China, Vietnam, and Burma identifies a typology that includes three main categories: (1) mass organizations created to support state policy, (2) GONGOs – government-organized NGOs with varying degrees of autonomy, and (3) genuinely grassroots organizations formed by citizens to advance diverse interests.¹⁰ Civic or-

ganizations in Russia, as in other authoritarian contexts, survive and even develop because they perform essential functions that often align with the state’s objectives. Similarly to authoritarian regimes, such as China, Vietnam, or Burma, the relationship between civil society and the state in Russia resembles a “marriage of convenience”.¹¹ Toepler et al.¹² offer a parallel classification: advocacy NGOs promoting rights-based agendas; service-providing nonprofits; and loyalist organizations that contribute to regime legitimacy.¹³

These typologies reflect the diversity of civic activity observable even in authoritarian settings – and challenge the liberal-democratic model as a universal instrument for analyzing civil society. They suggest that civil society cannot be assessed solely through the lens of open dissent, institutional independence, or liberal values. Rather, civic initiatives in authoritarian contexts often operate within hybrid arrangements, simultaneously engaging with and adapting to state structures. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing a more nuanced un-

“IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS, CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS OFTEN ENGAGE IN COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STATE, MARKED BY SIMULTANEOUS COOPERATION AND CONSTRAINT.”

derstanding of how civil society functions beyond democratic regimes.

The diversity of forms and manifestations of civic activism

Civil society must also be understood in terms of its multiple forms, levels of formality, and evolving modes of operation. Until recently, academic research and political analyses predominantly focused on the organizational perspective of civil society – emphasizing formally organized, professional advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which were typically associated with the idea of civil society. However, recent studies have highlighted the emergence of new types of civic activism that “seem to be very different from the familiar NGO model, being self-consciously shapeless, indeterminate, and even nebulous in form, deed, and vision”.¹⁴

In authoritarian regimes, informal networks serve as critical spaces for collective action, as formal organizations are either suppressed or co-opted by the state. While overt social protest – especially in its institutionalized form – is not the primary mode of civic activism in an authoritarian setting, grassroots social movements, self-organization, and everyday local-level mobilization play a far more significant role, even if they are least likely to be recognized by normative frameworks.¹⁵

Grassroots initiatives provide platforms for creating and disseminating alternative information that counters the state’s perspective, underscoring their role in fostering potential political activism under authoritarian conditions. Digital platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube now play a central role in organizing and disseminating civic initiatives. As overt activism becomes more dangerous or suppressed, the digital realm increasingly serves as a primary venue for resistance and alternative public discourse – a phenomenon referred to as “virtual civil society”.¹⁶

CULTURAL AND REGIONAL differences also shape civic behavior. Studies of African civil societies¹⁷ or ethnic regions within Russia¹⁸ illustrate how civic life is rooted in local traditions and values, giving rise to distinct configurations of civil engagement. In Russia, the emergence of regionally defined “national civil societies”¹⁹ based on ethnic identity and local culture challenges assumptions about the universality of civil society’s structure and function.

Taking into account the limitations and biases of the normative conceptualization of civil society discussed above, our analysis adopts a more pluralistic framework for assessing civil society in Russia that aims to capture the diversity of the Russian civic activism landscape, while taking into consideration the authoritarian political context. The analytical approach adopted in this study rests on the premise that the diversity of forms, actors, and criteria associated with civil society makes any generalized evaluation of this complex phenomenon insufficient. In the following sections, I introduce a segmentation model of Russian civil society and examine how its various segments have evolved since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

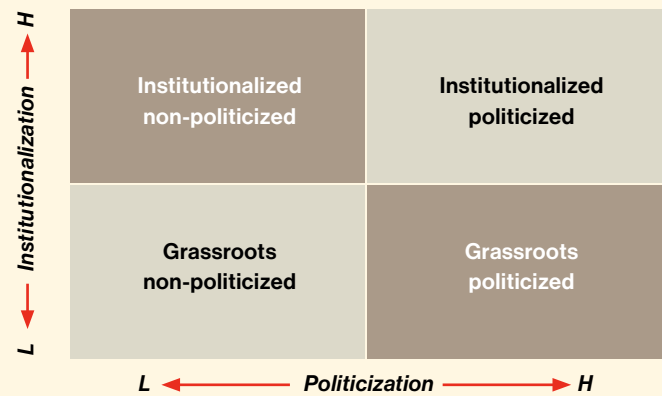


Figure 1. Civil Society: Analytical Perspective.

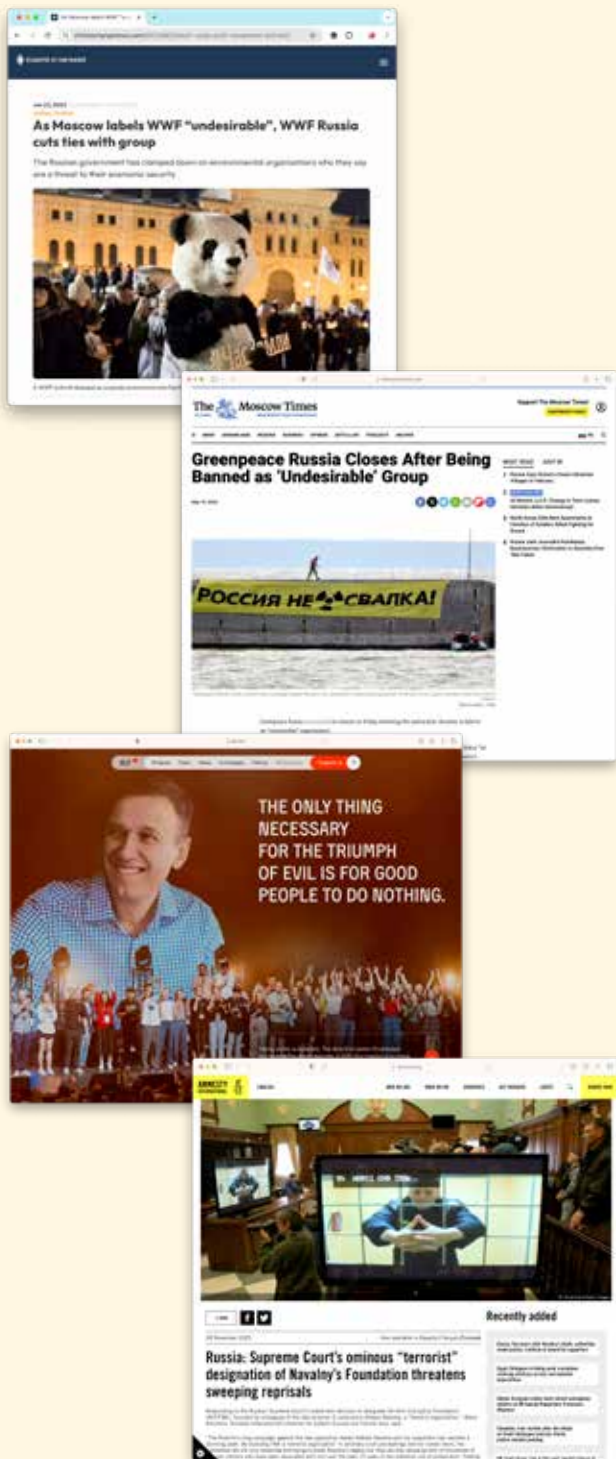
Contradictory dynamics of Russian civil society after the onset of war

To assess the impact of the war on Russian civil society, I employ a two-dimensional framework based on institutionalization/formalization and politicization of civic activities.

Institutionalization refers to the extent to which civic initiatives are organized, formalized, and integrated into the institutional fabric of Russian society. At one end of this spectrum are large, well-established NGOs, while at the other end lie informal or semi-formal grassroots initiatives that function more as networks or temporary associations than as formal organizations.

Politicization addresses the agenda of civic initiatives, specifically the extent to which they engage in regime criticism, promote democratic values, or defend human rights. At one end of this dimension are advocacy organizations and initiatives that openly oppose the political regime and work to protect the rights of marginalized groups. In this regard, the politicization axis closely resembles the classification proposed by Toepler et al., which distinguishes “claim-making or advocacy NGOs that promote liberal, rights-based agendas.” At the opposite end are depoliticized nonprofit service providers – both formal and informal – that primarily focus on addressing immediate social or economic needs, without engaging in political critique or advocacy.

AT THE INTERSECTION of these two dimensions, four distinct segments of Russian civil society emerge, as shown in Figure 1. Clearly, the boundaries between these segments are not rigid, and many organizations combine, for instance, advocacy and service functions. Similarly, some operate in a semi-formal mode – carrying out part of their work through formal structures and the rest through informal, grassroots formations. In the following section, I examine how different sectors of Russian civil society have evolved since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, with each of the identified segments demonstrating differing – and at times even opposing – dynamics in response to the invasion.



Screenshots over the silencing of the civil society. After 2022, WWF and Greenpeace were forced to leave the country after being labeled “foreign agents”. Navalny, who openly criticized the regime, was imprisoned and later killed, but the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) continued its work. In 2025, ACF, founded by Navalny, was labelled a “terrorist organization”.

Institutionalized civil society

The first segment comprises the most prominent politicized advocacy organizations – such as Memorial, Civic Watch, the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), the independent liberal press, and others dedicated to promoting democratic values, defending human rights, and upholding freedom of speech. This is the most visible segment of civil society which receives primary attention from Western experts, who see it as a potential lever and catalyst for democratic change in Russia.

All these organizations have openly criticized Putin’s regime and, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, adopted a clear anti-war stance. Consequently, they have faced some of the most severe repressions since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Many have been liquidated or forced to relocate abroad, and their leaders have either been imprisoned, compelled into exile, or killed – as in the case of FBK leader Alexey Navalny. When experts claim that civil society in Russia is dead, they are referring primarily to this sector.

Another institutionalized segment encompasses numerous nonprofit organizations that are less politically active and primarily focus on addressing societal needs. This includes service-providing organizations involved in healthcare, social assistance, support for children and the elderly, orphanages, migration, HIV, and many other areas. A significant portion of this segment is represented by environmental NGOs, which are among the oldest and most established organizations in Russian civil society. These organizations are well integrated into global networks and include branches of major international entities such as WWF and Greenpeace. Another distinctive feature of this sector is its heavy reliance on international funding. Notably, this segment comprises both independent NGOs and so-called GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations), which are established by the state and remain state-dependent.

After 2022, the sector declined dramatically. Many international organizations operating in Russia were labeled “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations” and were forced to leave the country. With international funding nearly eliminated and state resources diverted to military needs, the financing of this sector has been significantly reduced. At the same time, state control over the sector has intensified, and the number of GONGOs has increased.²⁰

The profound changes occurring in this segment of civil society remain unfortunately understudied, as most attention has focused on the repression and persecution of politically oriented organizations. Nevertheless, individual studies and interviews reveal significant transformations within the sector.

SURVIVING INDEPENDENT organizations are employing various adaptive strategies to cope with the new conditions. Research on changes in the environmental sector since the war’s outbreak, for example, has identified several strategies:²¹

- *Re-registration (Renaming)*: Organizations labeled as foreign agents or those working with “undesirable organizations” have re-registered under new names. Although some organi-

zations had already adopted this strategy following the introduction of the foreign agents law, its use became widespread after February 2022.

- *Distancing from Politics*: NGOs are avoiding any political statements or criticism of the state.
- *Self-Censorship*: Both internal discussions and public communications have become more self-censored.
- *Informalization*: Activities are shifting to the grassroots level, with many preferring to operate as non-registered groups rather than as formal organizations. This shift is accompanied by an increase in informal (person-to-person) mechanisms for interacting with state agencies and international partners.
- *Working from Exile*: Although many organization members have emigrated since the war began, they continue to collaborate with their colleagues in Russia. They maintain informal contacts with partners abroad, relying on social connections and the social capital cultivated over the years of previous collaboration.

THESE STRATEGIES are not unique to the environmental sector. For instance, interviews with founders of NGOs that provide legal and psychological support to women experiencing domestic violence or labor-related issues reveal similar adaptations.²² To avoid the stigma of being labeled a “foreign agent,” one organization rebranded twice since the onset of the war. Its organizers have ceased participating in public debates, stopped issuing public statements, and avoided press engagements. Although this organization previously received government and presidential grants – and still does so on a reduced scale – its old international partnerships are now maintained through newly established friendly contacts in Central Asia, where it conducts its main activities, such as trainings, seminars, and workshops.

Another example is an organization working in HIV prevention that was heavily dependent on foreign funding. Despite being designated a foreign agent, the organization successfully contested this decision in court and continues to operate, receiving financial support from abroad, albeit on a smaller scale. It deliberately distances itself from any political statements and functions under a constant state of uncertainty, with the ever-present risk of closure.²³

Grassroots civic activism

While organized civil society has been largely destroyed or has experienced a significant decline, grassroots activism has followed a strikingly different trajectory. The invasion of Ukraine triggered a surge of diverse forms of grassroots anti-war activism, manifesting in both overt and covert ways. Whereas public anti-war street protests were relatively limited in scale and were effectively suppressed by security forces, numerous forms of hidden or covert resistance emerged across the country.

Grassroots anti-war activism has taken many forms. On one end, radical leftist groups have engaged in *guerrilla-style provocations* along railway lines and even set fire to military recruitment centers. On the other, a wide range of *anti-war street art* has appeared – featuring symbols and messages opposing the



Wives of Mobilized Persons in Moscow, November 7, 2023.

PHOTO: “THE BRING THEM HOME” CHANNEL

war that are scratched, pasted, or stenciled onto houses, poles, buses, and even rendered as full-scale, professionally executed graffiti.²⁴

ANOTHER RAPIDLY GROWING form of anti-war activism – often described as *anti-propaganda* or *informational activism* – has surged since the war’s onset. This form includes the creation of multiple alternative information channels and blogs on platforms such as YouTube and Telegram, as well as new discussion forums and podcasts dedicated to “telling the truth” about the war and countering its escalating propaganda.

Following the announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022, numerous volunteer groups emerged to help potential conscripts avoid mobilization. These groups provide legal consultations about the rights of conscripts and the legal avenues available for refusing military service. They assist in obtaining necessary documentation, organize collective transport to the border, and supply food, water, and other essential items to young people enduring multi-day queues at border checkpoints.

New communities of women and mothers have also emerged in various localities, uniting in efforts to protect young people from being sent to the front. Mothers whose sons have already been deployed record video messages addressed to the president and regional authorities, urging them not to break the law by sending unprepared conscripts to the front lines and demanding that soldiers receive proper medical care, food, and clothing. Although these video messages might appear peculiar to Western observers, the “kneeling riot” (протест на коленях) has become a popular form of protest in Putin’s Russia.²⁵

A notable example of women’s activism is the movement of the Wives of Mobilized Persons – the “Bring Them Home” campaign – fighting for the demobilization of their husbands and loved ones after their service on the front lines. Initially, the primary methods involved appeals and complaints directed at military leadership and even President Putin. However, over time, as these appeals proved ineffective, the women began organizing protest marches – such as “The March of Empty Pots,”



RosShtraf is a crowdfunding project that helps to raise money directly for Russians who have been fined under politically motivated articles.



PHOTO: ROSHTRAF'S INSTAGRAM

during which they gathered at war memorials, rattling pots and pans to demand an end to the ongoing mobilization campaign and to bring their husbands home. Consequently, some members of the movement even campaigned against Putin during the presidential elections.

Ethnic grassroots protests have also emerged in response to the disproportionately high numbers of conscripts drafted from ethnic regions. Anti-war movements are particularly active in Buryatia and Tuva, which lead Russian regions in the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

LESS VISIBLE, yet equally significant, are forms of anti-war activism that resemble James Scott's concept of "silent resistance." These activities do not explicitly articulate an anti-war message but imply opposition to the war and the state's newly adopted militaristic policies. Examples include acts of sabotage against propagandistic changes in the education system – most notably, the introduction of compulsory propagandist lessons on "important" teaching "the truth" about so-called special operation. Teachers who are unwilling to participate in such propaganda have taken matters into their own hands by replacing the prescribed lesson topics with alternative narratives – often discussing existing international conflicts. They have organized social media groups to exchange potential topics and materials for these alternative lessons.²⁶ This trend is paralleled by women's activist groups such as Soft Power, which has initiated an alternative educational program for children titled "Tales for Peace," teaching essential

“A DISTINCT CLUSTER OF GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES, WHICH CAN BE TERMED HUMANITARIAN RESISTANCE, HAS ARISEN OUT OF EMPATHY FOR THOSE MOST SEVERELY AFFECTED BY THE WAR.”

war stance. This assistance includes legal, financial, and other forms of support for individuals arrested during protests. In addition to well-known human rights organizations like OVD Info and Agora – which largely rely on charitable donations – various grassroots fundraising initiatives have been established during the war. For example, RosShtraf was created to help pay fines incurred from politically motivated legal charges (such as those for expressing an anti-war stance or participating in protests), while Antifond supports individuals who have suffered professional setbacks due to their anti-war positions.

There is also evidence of growing financial support for organizations aiding migrants and refugees. According to the leader of the Civic Assistance Committee (CAC), which has been helping refugees and migrants for 33 years, donations have increased nearly eightfold since the war began – even in the face of the organization being stigmatized as a "foreign agent."²⁸

One striking example of humanitarian grassroots activism in response to the war is seen in the volunteer groups assisting Ukrainian refugees who found themselves on Russian soil after fleeing conflict zones and who are seeking to reach Europe. In just five months, one such group, which was the subject of a case study, expanded from several dozen participants to over 10,000. Similar groups have since emerged in Moscow and other cities.

A DEFINING FEATURE of these volunteer networks is that they operate as informal networks using Telegram chats. Unlike

values of peace, humanism, and freedom. Concerned parents, determined to counter the growing militarization of grade-school education, also use VKontakte chat groups to protest against military training in schools and colleges.

A distinct cluster of grassroots initiatives, which can be termed humanitarian resistance, has arisen out of empathy for those most severely affected by the war. Examples include compassionate actions toward Ukrainians – such as the creation of folk memorials adorned with flowers, candles, and toys at monuments associated with Ukraine or with victims of political repression. Anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova has labeled these memorials as "flower protests" or "compassionate protests".²⁷

Another form of humanitarian activism focuses on providing assistance to those repressed for expressing their anti-

traditional nonprofit organizations within the Russian civil activism sector, these groups deliberately refrain from establishing any formal organization or undergoing state registration – even though their internal organizational efficiency and functional division rival that of formal organizations. Although their assistance to Ukrainian refugees may outwardly resemble conventional humanitarian activism – and even align with the state’s call to help Ukrainian refugees – interviews with volunteers reveal that for them, providing such aid represents a covert form of protest against the war. It serves both as an expression of their outrage and as a means to cope with the shock of the conflict and the sense of powerlessness in a context where open protest is either impossible or ineffective.

Wartime civil society

Drawing on the analysis of sectoral shifts presented in the previous section, I outline the key features that have come to define Russian civil society in the wartime period.

Loss of institutional political influence

With the disintegration of the advocacy and politicized sectors – and the destruction of the flagship organizations that once formed the core of politically engaged civil society – civil society can no longer exert direct institutional influence on the political regime or state policy. Open protest or any overt expression of dissent against state policies has become virtually unsustainable. Consequently, the primary survival strategy now is to distance oneself from overt politics and comply with the new rules imposed by the state.

A “state over civil society” model in the institutional sector

Within the institutionalized segment, a model has emerged in which civil organizations are effectively subordinated to state structures. These organizations now serve as “drive belts” executing state policy. The service sector is heavily dependent on state funding, and obtaining foreign grants has become the exception – often only possible through informal channels and intermediary organizations in third countries. Access to state grants now depends largely on an organization’s loyalty, while any potential influence on shaping state policy is severely constrained by an increasing intolerance for any criticism of the state.

Shift toward grassroots initiatives

As formal, organized civil society has shrunk dramatically, the balance has shifted in favor of grassroots initiatives. The invisibility and informalization of civic activism are evident in the growing reliance on interpersonal contacts and local solidarity over formalized organizational relationships. This trend affects not only grassroots movements but also the transformation of once-prominent NGOs that are now operating underground. Even well-organized grassroots initiatives – such as the Telegram group aiding Ukrainian refugees – prefer to remain unregistered to avoid attracting state attention. When faced with the choice between visibility and safety, the latter invariably prevails.

Localized, atomized activity

Much of the civic activity now occurs at the local level and is highly localized, often rendering it invisible to outsiders. Civil society has become atomized, lacking open, formal mechanisms for interregional interaction. Researchers of wartime civic activism frequently compare its current form not to traditional networks but to a mycelium²⁹ or rhizome³⁰ – horizontal, fluid, temporal, and emerging suddenly in isolated pockets.

Strengthening trans-border solidarity

Grassroots civil society is marked by a significant increase in trans-border solidarity and enhanced collaboration with international partners. This heightened cross-border solidarity is driven, in the first place by the mass and rapid emigration of many activists and entire projects immediately after the war’s onset.³¹ Although this exodus has weakened domestic civil society, many activists continue to implement their projects in collaboration with colleagues who remain in Russia, acting as vital links in emerging transnational partnerships. In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether an initiative originates from within Russia or from abroad.

Digitalization of civic activism

As state repression intensifies, physical public spaces in cities have become increasingly risky for collective action. Consequently, civic activism has shifted to the digital sphere. Since the war began, the role of platforms like Telegram, Instagram, YouTube and other messaging apps for networking across the country – and especially for communication and coordination with colleagues abroad – has grown dramatically.

Emergence of “illiberal” activism alongside liberal movements

Alongside what might be termed “good” liberal civic activism, the war has also triggered a surge in “bad” or illiberal activism.³² Pro-war patriotic and nationalist groups have proliferated – groups that, unlike anti-war initiatives, do not need to hide from political persecution. Examples include Telegram channels that disseminate information about the situation in the military and on the front lines, collect donations to support the Russian army, purchase drones. Local volunteer groups weave camouflage nets and facilitate the production of military ammunition by women volunteers. In universities, while anti-war student groups continue to assist students prosecuted for protesting or evading mobilization, new youth patriotic and pro-war groups are emerging. Initiatives such as “Podhohlyata MGIMO,” compiling lists of students noted for anti-war or pro-Ukrainian statements, and the “Bely Voron” movement – a patriotic youth group now active even at HSE, once considered a bastion of liberalism – illustrate this trend.³³

Blurring of boundaries and criteria of politicization

A distinctive feature of wartime civil society is the blurring of boundaries and criteria for what constitutes politicization. In this context, politicization cannot be reduced merely to partici-

pation in political demonstrations or overt political activism, as it might be in democratic societies. Evaluating grassroots activism in terms of politicization is challenging. On the one hand, grassroots activists have traditionally distanced themselves from politics, viewing it as a “dirty business” – a sentiment common among such activists everywhere. With the onset of the war, however, distinguishing between political participation and everyday politicization has become even more difficult. One might speak of “suppressed” or “covert” politicization – as in the case of certain volunteer groups – or of deliberate depoliticization, where civil society organizations intentionally distance themselves from any political engagement. The war has, without a doubt, introduced specific characteristics into civil society; attitudes toward the war now serve as a litmus test for politicization and for attitudes toward the Putin regime. Historically, it has always been challenging to separate politicized protests from non-political ones in Russian civic activism, and under wartime conditions, this distinction becomes even more problematic. Here, politicization does not refer simply to participation in political actions or adherence to anti-regime slogans, but rather to an awareness of how politics influences everyday life – a subject that warrants further discussion.

Acceleration of authoritarian transformation of Russian civil society with the outbreak of war

It is important to note that the defining characteristics of Russian wartime civil society did not emerge solely in response to the war. Scholars had already identified significant shifts in the civic activism landscape well before February 2022, including the loss of political influence, growing dependence of civil society organizations on the state, and the increasing divergence between institutionalized and grassroots forms of civic engagement.

Politicized advocacy organizations began to experience political pressure and lose influence as early as Putin’s second presidential term. At that time, human rights groups were openly accused of being a “fifth column” of radicals intent on destroying Putin’s Russia, and the first attacks on human rights offices already took place.³⁴

The dependency of civil society organizations on the state did not originate with the war. The process of subordination of non-political NGOs to state interests began alongside the pressure on politically oriented organizations. The Russian Public Chamber that was established in 2004 with the declared aim of representing diverse public interests in fact functioned rather as a supervisory body intended to substitute for genuine civil society.³⁵ In 2006, Russian Federation Law #18-FZ expanded the government’s authority to audit and require reporting from non-profit organizations³⁶ – a move some researchers consider the “first bell” signaling the curtailment of foreign

influence on civil society and a precursor to the subsequent foreign agents law. That same year, the Presidential Grants program was launched, eventually becoming the largest – and nearly the only – domestic source of funding for civil society organizations in Russia, significantly reinforcing the financial dependence of service-oriented civic organizations on the state.³⁷

BY THE MID-2010S, a consensus emerged among researchers regarding the inherent weakness of civil society and its growing dependence on the state.³⁸ Some even identified the emergence of a distinct “Russian-style civil society” as a result of the state’s recapture of key civil society actors.³⁹ A substantial body of work has examined the nature of relationship between the state and civil society organizations in Russia. This literature describes a dual approach toward civil society⁴⁰ wherein the state divides non-governmental actors into those loyal to the status quo and those in opposition, employing various methods to support or restrict them. Consequently, the influence of NGOs on social policy has become increasingly constrained and directly linked to their political loyalty.

The adoption of the law on foreign agents in 2012 marked the beginning of an outright purge of independent civil society. Organizations stigmatized as “foreign agents” became “toxic” partners; it became nearly impossible for them to continue operating in Russia, forcing many either to dissolve or to go underground. At the same time, state funding for civil society organizations increased substantially – for instance, the Presidential Grants nearly doubled.⁴¹

Political repression intensified further after the annexation of Crimea. Starting in 2014, the number of organizations, associations, media outlets, and later individuals designated as foreign agents grew exponentially⁴² forcing NGOs to close, leave Russia, or operate clandestinely. Thus, by the time the war began, the segment of institutionalized civil society had already shrunk significantly and wielded very limited influence over state policy.

IN STARK CONTRAST, while organized civil society has experienced a decline since the mid-2000s – particularly after the 2010s – grassroots activism has evolved in a markedly different direc-

tion over the same period. Renowned civil society researcher and founder of the Institute of Collective Action, Karin Kleman, argues in her work that new “social movements” emerged and proliferated after 2000 as a unique form of grassroots activism. These movements were not predicated on direct confrontation with the system but rather on finding new avenues for self-assertion and resistance. Largely invisible due to their localized, targeted nature and non-political agenda, they nonetheless signaled a significant bottom-up mobilization⁴³ Kleman and her colleagues note that Putin’s second presidential term “became

“WITH THE ONSET OF THE WAR, HOWEVER, DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EVERYDAY POLITICIZATION HAS BECOME EVEN MORE DIFFICULT.”



Russian truckers' protest against Platon tax system. St. Petersburg, Russia, 2016.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



A protest against the construction of a landfill in Shies, February 2019.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

a period of bottom-up civic mobilization” beginning with widespread protests against the monetization of benefits in various regions in 2005, continuing with collective actions in cities opposing changes in housing and urban planning policies, and even including a surge of labor protests.⁴⁴ Some urban studies scholars determine a trend in Russia during the 2010s where local protests evolved from fragmented, short-term “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) initiatives to more politicized movements.⁴⁵

FOLLOWING THE SUPPRESSION of political protests in 2011–2012 and the subsequent intensification of repression, all databases monitoring grassroots social activism (such as, e.g., LaRuPed (Russian Protest Event Database), CPR (Contentious Politics in Russia), or Monitoring of Labor Protests) recorded a decline in open protests nationwide. However, after the annexation of Crimea, a new wave of civic activism emerged across Russia’s regions. Among the most striking examples are the “March on Moscow” by long-haul truck drivers protesting a new tariff collection system “Platon” (2016), a wave of protests against “renovation” (i.e., the demolition of five-story apartment buildings) that spread through Moscow and several other cities (2017), the “garbage protests” in the Moscow region and beyond (2017–2018), protests against the construction of a landfill in Shies (2019), and demonstrations in defense of the sacred Kushtau mountain in Bashkortostan (2020), among others. Notably, all these protests originated spontaneously as bottom-up initiatives before gradually scaling up and adopting a more organized format (if any). Some evolved into political activism that included direct demands to federal authorities for broader political change. For example, spontaneous mass protests following the deadly fire at the Zimnyaya Vishnya shopping center in Kemerovo in 2018 – caused by corruption and governmental negligence – escalated into calls for the resignation of the governor of Kemerovo Oblast. In parallel, researchers have observed a surge in local civic initiatives and social movements that, while not taking on a broader political meaning, have effectively addressed local

problems – for instance, local protests against the construction of a temple in a park in Yekaterinburg (2019) and many others. Scholars of environmental activism have noted that the rise in grassroots ecological mobilization in Russian regions in the years leading up to the war correlated less with actual environmental risks and more with ethnic and social characteristics.⁴⁶

A RECENTLY PUBLISHED book, *Varieties of Russian Activism*, edited by Jeremy Morris, Andrei Semenov, and Regina Smyth,⁴⁷ focuses on the increase in grassroots activism across various spheres and localities during the Putin’s era and specifically, in the years preceding the war. The book calls for a reassessment of the importance of bottom-up local activism and challenges the conventional portrayal of Russian society as “largely passive.” This resonates with the concept of “pockets of activism” developed by Debra Javeline and Sara Lindemann-Komarova, who as early as 2010 criticized researchers of Russian civil society for overlooking civic initiatives occurring outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg.⁴⁸ Similarly, Sundstrom et al.⁴⁹ in their recent study of Russian activism challenge existing stereotypes of Russians as apathetic and/or fearful of participating in civic activism and argue about a shift from professionalization and formalization of NGOs in the 1990s and early 2000s, to informal organizing, often assisted by social media platforms.

In sum, the divergence between organized and grassroots civil society began long before the war, and many of the characteristics that became fully visible after the full-scale invasion had already been taking shape over an extended period. While the war in Ukraine did provoke significant shifts in the scale and configuration of civic activism, the direction and content of these changes did not introduce fundamentally new features. Rather, they intensified pre-existing trends of authoritarian transformation within Russian civil society. Undoubtedly, the escalation of state repression following the outbreak of the war played a major role in accelerating these shifts, accompanying the broader process of authoritarian state-building – similar to developments observed in other

“THE PERCEIVED FAILURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA REFLECTS NOT ITS ACTUAL ABSENCE, BUT RATHER A MISMATCH BETWEEN NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS AND THE POLITICAL REALITIES OF AN INCREASINGLY AUTHORITARIAN REGIME.”

authoritarian regimes.⁵⁰ In this sense, the war functioned as an accelerator of both the Putin regime’s authoritarian consolidation and the authoritarian transformation of Russian civil society.

Discussion

Returning to the question that originally motivated this article – why Russian civil society is frequently perceived as “dead” – it seems that the issue lies less in its actual condition and more in the analytical lens through which it is evaluated. This perception appears to be largely the result of a mismatch between the authoritarian reality of civil society in Russia and the expectations of experts, which are shaped by the normative models of civil society rooted in democratic contexts.

The features described above clearly position Russian wartime civil society within the broader framework of an authoritarian model. Importantly, these features are not unique to Russia but are commonly observed in civil societies under other non-democratic regimes. For example, the rise of grassroots mobilization amid intensified repression of formal political structures mirrors patterns seen in authoritarian contexts such as China and Vietnam.⁵¹ The growing reliance on digital platforms for civic engagement⁵² resulting in the formation of a “virtual civil society” – is likewise a typical trait of authoritarian environments.⁵³ Moreover, key developments in Russia – such as increasing state control, loss of financial autonomy, erosion of political influence, the shrinking space for institutionalized protest, and the expansion of grassroots, localized self-organization – are consistent with characteristics of civil society in authoritarian settings.

Despite these structural changes, expectations of Russian civil society often remain rooted in liberal-democratic models. This dissonance may be partly sustained by longstanding discursive strategies that label Russia as a form of democracy – whether “managed,” “sovereign,” or “virtual.” As a result, the perceived failure of civil society in Russia reflects not its actual absence, but rather a mismatch between normative expectations and the political realities of an increasingly authoritarian regime.

RUSSIA IS NOT the only case in which a divergence between normative models and reality has led to expert disappointment and unfulfilled expectations regarding civil society. For instance, Kasfir – commenting on Western disappointment with the role of civil society in supporting democracy in African countries – highlights the inadequacy of the “conventional notion” of civil society, which includes only those organizations that can maintain independence and actively oppose the state.⁵⁴ He raises the question, “whether civil society disappears when its actors engage in non-confrontational activities”,⁵⁵ a question that is entirely applicable to the evaluation of Russian civil society since the war began.

Similarly, post-communist civil societies in Eastern European countries were declared “in decline, if not dead”⁵⁶ following the triumph of democratic elections. The disappointment with – and the perceived insufficient role of – civil society in building democratic systems in Eastern Europe stemmed partly from expectations shaped by the “dissident image” of civil society, whose value was primarily seen in its opposition to totalitarian regimes.⁵⁷ Another contributing factor was the tendency to include only “pro-democratic” organizations within the definition of civil society, while categorizing others as part of the “non-civil” sphere. This “normative trap,” inherent in much research on Eastern European civil society, predisposes the relationship between the state and civil society to be confrontational. Similar normative perspective ultimately leads to the expert assessments I observe today regarding wartime Russian civil society, which is deemed to have effectively ceased to exist.

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has not eradicated Russian civil society; rather, it has acted as a catalyst, accelerating and completing a process of authoritarian transformation that began long before the full-scale invasion. This transformation unfolded gradually in parallel with the consolidation of Vladimir Putin’s regime, the tightening of state control over independent organizations, and the increasing repression of dissenting voices.

The analysis presented in this article highlights divergent trajectories across different segments of Russian civil society. Highly institutionalized and politicized organizations have been subject to acute repression, leading to their decline or dismantlement. In contrast, grassroots civic activism has expanded, assuming increasingly informal, decentralized, and often digital forms. These bottom-up initiatives rarely develop into formalized associations, but they reflect the persistence – and in many cases the intensification – of civic engagement in new and less visible configurations.

This divergence between institutional and grassroots civil society is not a new phenomenon. It has been developing since the mid-2000s, as state pressure on NGOs increased and the public sphere contracted. The outbreak of war triggered a sharp escalation in authoritarian state-building, bringing with it a wave of repression that has further fragmented and reconfigured the civic landscape.

In light of these developments, it is imperative to reconsider the analytical focus of civil society research in the Russian context. Instead of centering on formal organizations – especially those with explicit political agendas, whether operating domestically or in exile – future studies should attend more closely to informal, grassroots, and everyday forms of civic engagement. As Russia becomes an increasingly closed and repressive envi-

ronment, this shift will require innovative methodologies and new conceptual tools capable of capturing the evolving nature of civic life under authoritarian rule.

This analysis also raises a broader methodological question about the conceptualization of civil society. The issue is not merely whether civil society in Russia has survived but whether dominant normative models are adequate for analyzing civic formations in authoritarian contexts. A central challenge is the question of state dependence: to what extent can organizations be reliant on the state – financially, institutionally, or politically – and still be considered part of civil society? Where is the threshold beyond which civic initiatives cease to be autonomous and thus lose their civil character?

GIVEN THE DIVERSITY of authoritarian regimes – varying in degrees of openness, repression, electoral manipulation, and institutional control – it follows that different types of civil societies may emerge under different authoritarian conditions. These variations include differences in the level of autonomy, degrees and forms of institutionalization, the scale of informal versus formal activity, and the nature of civic-state relations.

Consequently, just as scholars have developed typologies of authoritarian regimes, there is a compelling need to elaborate typologies of civil society that correspond to those regimes. Such typologies would allow for more context-sensitive and theoretically grounded analyses of civic life across political systems.

In sum, the Russian case underscores the inadequacy of applying a singular, liberal-democratic model of civil society to all contexts. Understanding civil society in authoritarian settings requires both empirical attentiveness to its evolving forms and conceptual flexibility to accommodate variation beyond normative expectations. ✖

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Acknowledgement: I thank the participants of the Postcommunist Politics Social Science Workshop at IERES for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I am particularly grateful to Gulnaz Sharafutdinova for her incisive analysis and challenging questions. This research was made possible by the generous support of the Fortitude Fund.

appendix

The List of Expert Interviews

#	Sphere of activity	Place	Date	Name
1	Helping refugees and immigrants	USA	Jan 2024	Svetlana Gannushkina
2	Independent Trade Union: Protection of labor rights	online	Nov 2022	Anonymous
3	Helping victims of domestic violence	online	Jun 2024	Anonymous
4	Stop the HIV epidemic	online	Dec 2023	Anonymous

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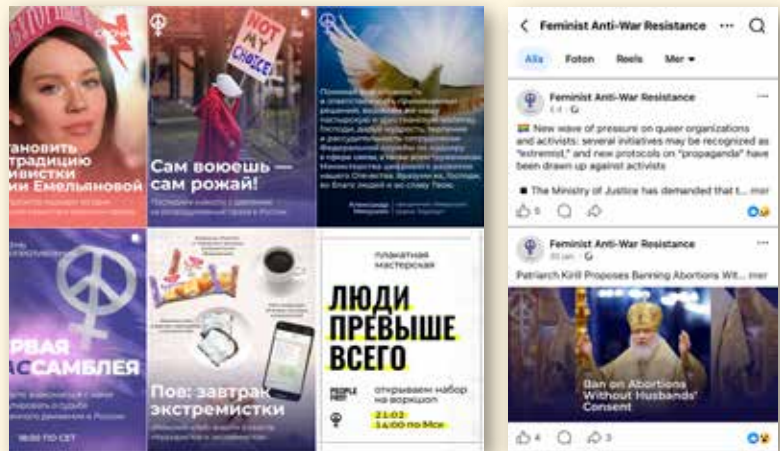
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A photo of a banner from a fake image of a protest, and a manipulated photo appearing to show a banner on the Arsenal Tower in the Kremlin are two examples of "Photoshop activism".



The feminist online magazine *Wonderzine* was launched in 2013 and banned in 2022.



The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) is a digitally-enabled movement founded in response to Russia's war on Ukraine. PHOTO: FAR'S INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK

MEDIA REALISM

Conceptual insights from research on digital feminisms in and beyond Russia

by Daniil Zhaivoronok

abstract

This article introduces the concept of *media realism* to theorize the political sensibility that emerges from feminists' engagement with digital media in contemporary Russia and beyond. Drawing on empirical data and insights from the FEMCORUS research project, the article explores how activists and media professionals navigate the contradictory affordances of digital media ecosystems that simultaneously enable oppositional political expression and practices and impose significant structural constraints. In this context, *media realism* refers to the experience of digital media as flawed, yet without alternatives. Thus, the concept captures the affective and ethical (dis)orientation of activists who recognize the problematic

underpinnings of existing ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) architectures yet continue to rely on them for visibility, mobilization, and resistance. Through empirical case studies, the article demonstrates how feminist actors adapt their tactical repertoires and renegotiate their ethics due to a media environment shaped by both authoritarian repression and neoliberal media logic. Ultimately, *media realism* offers a grounded, non-reductionist framework for understanding the ambivalences of digital activism under constraints and invites further inquiry into how political subjectivities are shaped by the ICTs infrastructures they inhabit.

KEYWORDS: Media realism, feminism, digital activism, sensibility, Russia.

For over a decade, new media technologies have played a pivotal role in shaping oppositional politics and civil society in Russia.¹ In particular, scholars have noted the significant impact of digital media on the development of feminist activism and culture in the country.² Amid ongoing state repression of dissent, a conservative turn, and the systematic erosion of civil rights and liberties – including freedom of speech, assembly, and association – digital media have emerged as vital spaces for activists’ connection, dialogue, and organization. Within this context, as Ratilainen et al. argue, digital platforms and cultures contributed to fostering a vibrant and dynamic feminist media ecology in Russia.³ This ecology has not only enabled the public circulation of feminist discourses but also contributed to the formation of collective feminist identities by providing activists with interpretive frameworks, cognitive maps, networking opportunities, and tools for mobilization.⁴

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the ruling regime intensified its crackdown on political dissent and independent media in Russia. As a result, many journalists and activists were forced into exile, compelled to invent new strategies and tactics to adapt to life in host countries while continuing their resistance to the authoritarian rule back home in a remote mode.⁵ In this context, the role of digital media in sustaining oppositional movements and civil society – both within Russia and in exile – has only grown more central.⁶ Social media platforms, messaging apps, and other digital tools have become the primary infrastructure for many anti-war movements and activist groups, including the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR).⁷ It is no exaggeration to say that contemporary communication technologies now shape not only the organizational forms but also the tactical repertoires of most oppositional political initiatives.

THIS ARTICLE contributes to the growing body of literature on the political implications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. While much of this scholarship has focused on how digital media enable activists to circumvent censorship, build networks, and amplify dissent, this article introduces a different perspective. Rather than asking how digital media help activists overcome challenges, I focus on how digital media themselves become a source of challenge. Thus, I bring critical reflection into the research on oppositional media-activism in Russia and similar contexts, emphasizing that activists do not simply use digital media but must also contend with their structural limitations, ideological biases, and embedded logics.

I further argue that in this sense ICTs appear in activist experience as deeply ambivalent and contradictory instruments: they empower resistance to authoritarianism while simultane-

ously introducing new forms of control;⁸ they offer alternatives to state censorship while imposing their own algorithmic and commercial constraints on what can be said, seen, and heard;⁹ and they facilitate horizontal connections while reproducing new hierarchies and exclusions.¹⁰ These contradictory dynamics are not merely technical or logistical; they are political and affective, shaping how activists think, feel, and act within digital environments.¹¹

To conceptualize activists’ lived experience of contradictions embedded in digital media systems, this article introduces the concept of *media realism*. I define *media realism* as a mode of political and cultural sensibility shaped by activists’ simultaneous awareness of both the possibilities and the limitations of contemporary media infrastructures. This sensibility emerges from practical experiences: activists acutely recognize the structural constraints imposed by platforms’ neoliberal rationalities, algorithms, and surveillance architectures, yet they also acknowledge these same platforms as the most accessible and effective tools for communication, mobilization, and resistance to conservative and authoritarian regimes.

“SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, MESSAGING APPS, AND OTHER DIGITAL TOOLS HAVE BECOME THE PRIMARY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR MANY ANTI-WAR MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVIST GROUPS.”

MEDIA REALISM, then, as conceptualized in this article, is not a theory of media use or media’s representational and epistemic functions,¹² but a grounded account of activists’ lived and affective experiences as they navigate the contradictions of the digital terrain under conditions of multiple constraints. It captures a sensibility that is at once pragmatic and critical, hopeful and disillusioned, strategic and, at times, cynical. As such, it offers a valuable lens for understanding the affective and political dynamics of feminist digital ac-

tivism (and other digitalized activism as well) in contemporary Russia – and potentially beyond. Thus, the concept allows for a nuanced, non-reductionist analysis of how activists (and media professionals) experience and negotiate complex terrains, where technological architectures and platform logics intersect with ethical imperatives and political commitments.

In elaborating this concept, the article draws on empirical observations from three case studies of mediated feminist activism in Russia, conducted by the author and colleagues as part of the FEMCORUS (Mediated feminism[s] in contemporary Russia) research project. These cases illuminate how *media realism* underpins activists’ negotiations with the affordances and limitations of digital media in a context marked by authoritarian governance, conservative cultural politics, and the attention economy, thus also underpinning the operations of global platforms.¹³ In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the politics of digital media systems¹⁴ and offers new directions for theorizing feminist digital activism under conditions of what might be called “double entanglement”¹⁵ – between state repression and digital media logic.

THIS ARTICLE IS STRUCTURED as follows. First, I outline key theoretical debates within the field of digital media and activist studies, with particular attention to the Russian context and other authoritarian regimes. Then, drawing on both existing literature and insights generated through the FEMCORUS research project, I introduce the concept of *media realism* as a framework for understanding how mediated activism is experienced and lived through. The following sections aim to develop this concept through empirical illustrations, demonstrating how it can be operationalized and applied in research practice. I begin by presenting the specific case studies that inform my conceptualization of *media realism*. Building on these cases, I then explore how the concept can be used to analyze activist experiences of navigating and interacting with digital/hybrid media systems. The first analytical section examines how activists respond to the constraining effects of these systems in relation to organizational practices and strategic planning. The second focuses on how different modalities of cynicism are embedded within a *media realist* sensibility, and how they shape the tactical and moral choices activists make in their engagement within digital/hybrid media systems underlined by an attention economy and a post-truth media regime. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the limitations of this conceptual framework and outlines potential directions for further research.

Digital activism between empowerment and constraint

Far from functioning merely as tools of communication, contemporary ICTs such as social networks, messaging apps, and content-sharing services have reconfigured the practices, imaginaries, and even ontologies of political movements.¹⁶ These transformations have prompted scholars to develop a diverse set of conceptual frameworks – such as connective action,¹⁷ networked activism,¹⁸ slacktivism,¹⁹ hybrid media,²⁰ mediation opportunity structure,²¹ social media logic,²² surveillance capitalism,²³ and the neoliberal selfie gaze²⁴ among others – to capture the complex interplay between digital infrastructures and political *bios*.²⁵

DESPITE THEIR theoretical differences, most of these approaches nevertheless converge on a shared recognition of the ambivalent role digital media architectures play in contemporary activism. On the one hand, digital platforms are heralded for their capacity to democratize and decentralize discursive production, rendering activism “easier, cheaper, and sometimes even more effective.”²⁶ ICTs, it is said, provide activists with vital tools for networking, mobilization, and visibility; they enable the formation of translocal solidarities, the rapid dissemination of counter-hegemonic narratives, and the articulation of new political subjectivities.²⁷ Scholars have noted that these affordances are particularly salient in illiberal and authoritarian contexts where oppositional actors’ access to traditional media and institutional resources is severely restricted. More specifically, in the context of research on feminist activism in Russia, this position is supported by Solovey, who highlights that digital platforms

“have minimal entry requirements, no institutional barriers, and provide access to wide audiences”, thus positioning them as “a perfect tool” for grassroots organizing and for amplifying the voices of marginalized communities “who seek to make themselves heard.”²⁸ This view underscores the empowering potential of digital media, especially for those excluded from conventional political arenas.

On the other hand, a growing body of critical scholarship interrogates the structural constraints and ideological entanglements embedded in digital infrastructures. Scholars argue that the affordances of these platforms are deeply intertwined with the attention economy, neoliberal rationality, and the commodification of sociality.²⁹ As a result, digital activism often (re)produces new forms of inequality within virtual (counter)publics.³⁰ Moreover, within neoliberal architectures of new media, movements are compelled to compete for visibility, conform to platform-specific norms, and navigate algorithmic constraints that shape what can be said, seen, and valued.³¹ In the context of feminism in Russia, researchers have noted that digital infrastructures and cultures facilitate the reproduction of symbolic and economic inequalities among activists, and that the logic of social media is sometimes perceived by activists themselves as incompatible with feminist values and grassroots political ethics.³² These critiques highlight the paradox of digital activism: the very platforms that enable resistance also impose new forms of discipline and exclusion.

THIS ARTICLE INTRODUCES the concept of *media realism* to theorize the political sensibility that emerges from the experience of these contradictions embedded in the very architecture of contemporary hybrid media systems. To develop this concept, I draw on insights from interviews with feminist activists and media professionals, as well as from netnographic observations.³³ More specifically, my understanding of *media realism* is grounded in an analysis of activists’ lived experiences of the contradictory effects of new media, including the organizational, strategic, tactical, moral, and political questions and dilemmas that arise from encounters with hybrid/digital media.

Thus, *media realism* is not primarily concerned with identifying the external or “objective” effects of media architectures. Rather, it seeks to understand the parameters of subjectivities or “structures of feeling”³⁴ that emerge through engagement with these systems. As I argue, *media realism* captures the affective and pragmatic orientation of activists who approach digital media both as indispensable tools for political expression and as infrastructures that simultaneously create obstacles and constrain the very possibilities of such expression. Thus, the concept foregrounds the affective and subjective consequences of the tension between empowerment and limitation, visibility and erasure, connection and fragmentation that defines the contemporary media-political conjuncture. Rather than framing digital media as inherently emancipatory or oppressive, *media realism* emphasizes the ambivalence and complexity of activists’ lived experiences of inhabiting and navigating these systems.

Media realism: a concept in the making

In developing the concept of *media realism*, I draw primarily on two theoretical sources: Mark Fisher's notion of *capitalist realism* and Jilly Boyce Kay's concept of *feminist realism*. Both frameworks offer valuable insights into how ideological structures and cultural technologies shape political imagination and everyday practice, particularly under conditions of systemic constraint.

In his influential book, cultural theorist Mark Fisher³⁵ argues that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of celebratory narratives about the "end of history", mainstream culture – particularly in the developed societies – has become incapable of imagining a world beyond or without capitalism. What emerged instead is the dominant sensibility of "capitalist realism", which he defines as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."³⁶ Crucially, Fisher emphasizes that this emergent sensibility does not prevent people from recognizing the flaws of capitalism; on the contrary, these flaws are often plainly visible and widely acknowledged. However, capitalist realism insists that these flaws must be endured, not overcome – because no alternative is conceivable. This ideological closure, Fisher argues, contributes to widespread political frustration and a cultural atmosphere of depression and resignation across the most developed countries.

PARTIALLY BUILDING on Fisher's insights, feminist media studies scholar Jilly Boyce Kay introduces the concept of "feminist realism" to describe a recent reactionary turn in some online feminist communities.³⁷ According to Kay, these communities treat patriarchy as a fixed and unchangeable social structure, rooted in biological differences between men and women.

Like capitalist realism, this worldview also recognizes the flaws of the existing social structures, but forecloses the possibility of imagining more egalitarian, alternative systems to heteropatriarchy, abandoning "any utopian desires for large-scale social and political transformation."³⁸ However, this reactionary "anti-hope structure of feeling" does not entail passive acceptance of female subordination. Instead, it encourages women to "realistically" understand the rules of patriarchal society and learn to play by them. Within these discourses, women are prompted to internalize and adapt to the logic of patriarchy, and, rather than "daydreaming" about feminist revolution, to pursue advantages within the patriarchal system by learning how to manipulate men. The goal of this form of feminism is to teach women how to perform a "successful" and "empowered" femininity³⁹ and develop "practical strategies to increase female power" within

the confines of patriarchal norms.⁴⁰ As such, feminist realism contains a certain degree of cynicism: a willingness to abandon moral norms and political ideals in favor of maximizing individual advantage within the established structures of power.

THE CONCEPT OF *media realism* draws on insights from both Fisher and Kay to theorize a sensibility – or structure of feeling – that emerges from feminist activists' lived engagement with the contradictions of the contemporary digital media environment. I propose to understand *media realism* as a mode of political and cultural sensibility that is conditioned by activists' simultaneous recognition of the empowering affordances and structural constraints embedded within the contemporary ICTs architecture. This sensibility is shaped by a constitutive tension: on one hand, activists are critically aware of the limitations imposed by digital platforms' neoliberal rationalities, algorithmic governance, and surveillance infrastructures; on the other, they acknowledge that these very platforms remain among the most accessible and effective instruments for communicative action, networked mobilization, and resistance tactics.

Thus, in a manner analogous to Fisher's capitalist realism, *media realism* reflects activists' acute awareness that the archi-

tecture of digital media – and social media platforms in particular – has serious flaws and in many respects contradicts feminist politics committed to values of equality, justice, and solidarity. In some cases, activists might even feel that the logic of contemporary hybrid media systems directly contradicts the values at the core of their activism.⁴¹ Yet despite this recognition, they do not feel that it is possible to change or even meaningfully influence these systems.⁴² In other words, the digital media environment, like the neoliberal order in Fisher's analysis, is experienced as, at least to some degree, unsatisfactory but without alternative. This sense of

“DIGITAL MEDIA CONTINUE TO PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN OPPOSITIONAL POLITICS IN RUSSIA, OFFERING PRECARIOUS YET VITAL SPACES FOR FEMINIST DISCOURSE, ANTI-WAR ACTIVISM, AND GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION.”

inevitability often produces feelings of frustration among activists.⁴³ However, it does not necessarily lead to political paralysis or the abandonment of digital tools. On the contrary, most respondents in the analyzed case studies continued to use new media in their activism, even while acknowledging their limitations and side effects. *Media realism*, therefore, reflects a pragmatic – and at times cynical, similarly to "feminist realism"⁴⁴ – engagement with digital platforms: activists know that these platforms and media system at large are shaped by the imperatives of social and symbolic capital accumulation, as well as by competition between both individual and collective actors,⁴⁵ yet they continue to rely on them because there are few, if any, alternatives that offer comparable reach, immediacy, or visibility.

Thus, *media realism* is not a passive acceptance of the status quo. Rather, it is a form of strategic adaptation – a way of navi-

gating a media environment that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. Activists may tailor their organizational strategies, communication flows, and protest tactics to fit platform norms or audience and media-professionals' expectations, or engage in self-branding to gain visibility.⁴⁶ These tactics reflect a deep and practical understanding of how media systems work, but might also entail a sense of exhaustion or burnout when it comes to the feeling of impossibility of radically changing the ICTs' infrastructures and infracultures.⁴⁷

Importantly, *media realism*, as conceptualized here, is shaped by the geopolitical and technological specificity of the Russian context, even if it is not entirely unique to it. This context is defined by a particular media landscape: on the one hand, it is dominated by global ICT giants such as Google, Meta, Tik Tok, Telegram and X; on the other, it is marked by state control over traditional media, increasing surveillance, restrictions on digital platforms, and the systematic deployment of information manipulation tactics.⁴⁸ Within these constraints, digital media continue to play a central role in oppositional politics in Russia, offering precarious yet vital spaces for feminist discourse, anti-war activism, and grassroots mobilization. However, the legitimacy of using these platforms is often grounded not in their neutrality or democratic potential, but in their capacity to resist a more immediate and overwhelming threat: an authoritarian, militarized, repressive, and ideologically conservative regime. In this sense, *media realism* in the Russian context is not merely a response to technological affordances but a result of a strategic adaptation to a broader hostile political environment.

Ultimately, I argue that *media realism* grasps the affective modality through which activists experience and engage with digital technologies, and which simultaneously shapes how they think, act, and imagine the future. The concept seeks to open new perspectives for both academics and activists, inviting them to critically examine not only the outputs of media activism but also the infrastructures, practices, affects, and cultures that make it possible, and to ask what forms of resistance, solidarity, and imagination might emerge from within – and perhaps beyond – these entangled systems.

Methodological note and case studies

The insights and arguments in the present article are largely informed by observations and findings about the Russian feminist media ecology from the FEMCORUS collective research project, as presented in the collective monograph⁴⁹ and other publications.⁵⁰ Moreover, the current conceptualization of *media realism* is based on the author's longitudinal involvement in researching the impact of digital media and online cultures on the development of feminist discourse and political imagination in Russia during an authoritarian and conservative shift. However, this article primarily draws on data and analysis from three case studies, conducted by the author, which are detailed below.

The central case is the study of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), a digitally enabled social movement founded by Russian feminists in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of



The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) is a digitally enabled social movement founded by Russian feminists in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. PHOTO: TELEGRAM

Ukraine in February 2022. Over time, FAR has evolved into a transnational movement with local chapters across multiple countries.⁵¹ As part of this research, research assistant Alisa Virtanen and I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with FAR activists to explore the role of media tools in shaping the movement's organizational practices, communication strategies, and tactical decisions. The interviews were conducted in two rounds: 16 between September 2022 and March 2023, followed by 6 follow-ups in February–March 2024. Respondents were based in multiple locations, predominantly in Europe, and occupied varied roles within FAR – from members of local chapters to international coordinators.⁵² They ranged in age from 22 to 39, and their professional backgrounds included artists, students, academics, musicians, and practitioners in the creative industries. In addition to interviews, I collected supplementary materials, including FAR's own publications and media coverage of its activities. Research publications based on these data address a wide spectrum of questions – from how digital media influence the development of feminist identity to the tensions between media logics and the logics of political action.⁵³

The second case focuses on the online feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine*, launched in 2013. The outlet played a significant role in normalizing and disseminating feminist discourse in Russia. The research included four interviews (May–June 2024) with four media-professionals, who collaborated with *Wonderzine* in different capacities (editorial team, freelance contributors), an archive analysis of its publications, and netnographic observations. The study examined how feminism was integrated into the outlet's brand identity and the cultural and political effects of its media strategies.⁵⁴

The third case examines the so-called “Photoshop activism” protest,⁵⁵ orchestrated by a group of feminists in 2017. This protest action was hybrid in character, combining elements of the traditional repertoire of political contention (solo pickets, street performances) with a digital repertoire. As part of the latter, the activists created a fake photograph depicting feminists atop one of the Kremlin towers with a banner and riot flames, and disseminated it to various news outlets, including opposition media. Once the image was revealed to be fabricated, a public debate unfolded across news media and social platforms, prompting reflection within the feminist community on the ethics and politics of media activism. This case study is based on media and social media netnography and investigates how supporters and critics legitimized or delegitimized the use of fakes in feminist activism, situating the debate within the broader context of post-truth politics.⁵⁶

TOGETHER, THESE CASES span different time periods – both before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They also represent diverse organizational formats (e.g., grassroots activist collectives and professional media) and types of activities in temporal terms (e.g., Photoshop feminism is a one-time event, while FAR and *Wonderzine* are long-term projects) and typological terms (e.g., political and business-oriented). I argue that this heterogeneity of cases helps to illustrate that the *media realist* sensibility is not confined to particular cases, but rather encompasses various types of mediated action and time periods. Crucially, it also demonstrates that, despite the profound transformations in Russia since 2022, many trends in media activism and professional media practices have not fundamentally changed. Rather than introducing entirely new trajectories, these transformations have intensified pre-existing dynamics. Notably, the Russian authoritarian regime had already been targeting activists, including feminists, prior to the war. Similarly, the architecture of major new media platforms and the logic of the Russian authoritarian media system have remained largely intact, even as specific parameters have been reshuffled.⁵⁷

The digital gap and reproduction of inequalities in activists’ organizing and media strategies

As was mentioned before, the digital turn in activism has been widely celebrated in the literature for its potential to democratize participation, reduce organizational costs, and empower marginalized voices. Scholars such as Bennett and Segerberg,⁵⁸ Castells,⁵⁹ and Earl and Kimport⁶⁰ have argued that digital media enable more flexible, horizontal, and inclusive forms of political engagement. Sometimes it’s also argued that digital activism,

due to its networked structure and individuals’ opportunity to shape their stories alone, is “discouraging hierarchy”.⁶¹ According to this view, the internet lowers the entry barriers for political participation, allowing individuals to contribute to collective action without the need for formal organizational structures or significant material resources. This shift is often framed as a move from “collective” to “connective” action, where individuals mobilize through personalized content and decentralized networks. In sum, these perspectives emphasize the potential of digital media to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and foster more inclusive forms of activism.

However, this optimistic discourse has been increasingly challenged by empirical research that highlights the persistence – and in some cases, the intensification – of social inequalities in digital activism.⁶² One of the most compelling critiques comes from Jen Schradie,⁶³ who introduces the concept of the “digital activism gap.” Drawing on extensive multisite fieldwork, Schradie demonstrates that digital activism is not equally accessible to all social groups. In fact, her research reveals a pronounced social class divide: individuals and organizations from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are significantly more likely to engage in digital activism than their working-class counterparts.⁶⁴

to engage in digital activism than their working-class counterparts.⁶⁴

This gap is not simply a matter of access to technology, but reflects deeper structural inequalities related to education, income, cultural capital, and time. Middle-class activists often enter the digital sphere already equipped with the necessary skills, resources, and confidence to navigate complex media environments; they possess “organizational resources and individual access, skills, time, and the entitlement”⁶⁵ that enable them to dominate digital spaces. In contrast, working-class individuals frequently lack these advantages and may feel alienated or excluded from digital activism. Moreover, because middle-class actors often set the norms and standards for what constitutes effective digital engagement, working-class participants may internalize a sense of inadequacy or inauthenticity, further discouraging their participation.⁶⁶

Moreover, because middle-class actors often set the norms and standards for what constitutes effective digital engagement, working-class participants may internalize a sense of inadequacy or inauthenticity, further discouraging their participation.⁶⁶

THIS CONSTRAINING and exclusionary dynamic is not limited to class. Aristeia Fotopoulou⁶⁷ has identified a parallel age-based divide in digital activism. Her research on feminist NGOs and political collectives reveals that more senior women often feel less confident using digital tools and online media. Compared to younger activists, older generations typically possess fewer digital skills and less experience with new media technologies. Thus, rather than lowering barriers to participation, digitalization can actually exacerbate exclusion for older generations, making it more difficult for them to engage meaningfully in online activ-

“THE MAJORITY OF OUR INFORMANTS BELONGED TO THE CREATIVE OR MIDDLE CLASSES, INCLUDING ARTISTS, CULTURAL WORKERS, NGO EMPLOYEES, STUDENTS AT WESTERN UNIVERSITIES, AND FREELANCE DESIGNERS.”



The online feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine* launched in 2013. In April 2022, *Wonderzine* was banned by the Russian government primarily because of its support for the LGBTQIA+ community. The outlet played a significant role in normalizing and disseminating feminist discourse in Russia, but has been criticized for prioritizing marketability and aesthetic appeal over political content.

PHOTO: WONDERZINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE

ism.⁶⁸ This generational gap is compounded by broader societal narratives that associate digital fluency with youth, thereby marginalizing older individuals and reinforcing their exclusion from digital spaces.

These class and generational gaps were clearly observable in the profiles of activists from FAR who were interviewed as part of the FEMCORUS research project. Among the respondents, as the description in the previous section indicates, there were no representatives from the older generation; the oldest respondent was 39 years old. Similarly, our sample lacked participants from industrial or service-sector working-class backgrounds. Instead, the majority of our informants belonged to the creative or middle classes, including artists, cultural workers, NGO employees, students at Western universities, and freelance designers. While our snowball sampling method does not allow for a fully representative analysis, the absence of working-class and older-generation activists in our sample suggests that these groups are underrepresented in FAR. This underrepresentation is likely grounded in the above-mentioned structural barriers around class and generation that digital activism poses for individuals from these demographics.

While the most structurally vulnerable groups were absent from the sample, the interviewed activists nonetheless represented a range of social positions, resources, and digital competencies. Several participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the social and symbolic inequalities that persist within FAR. They acknowledged that informal hierarchies are often reproduced internally and linked these dynamics directly to the logic

of contemporary media systems.⁶⁹ As I have argued elsewhere,⁷⁰ some FAR activists observed that their capacity to participate in online activities – such as engaging in discussions, responding to messages, and contributing to digital organizing – significantly shaped their visibility and influence within the movement. Those with greater availability and digital fluency were better positioned to cultivate strong intra-movement networks and exert influence over collective decision-making processes.⁷¹

THE DISTRIBUTION of free time available for digital engagement, in turn, was closely tied to activists' material conditions. As one respondent, Pala, explained:

There are very different activists [...] everyone has a very different social situation, yes, some can afford not to work [...] they have a scholarship, or they have a husband, or, I don't know, they own apartments in Moscow that they rent out and live in Yerevan with that money. Some people don't have such resources, some have to work, so they invest different amounts of resources [into FAR activities], and [...] In fact, in my opinion, what happens is that those who can invest more resources [into FAR activities] have more influence on decisions.

This quote encapsulates the intersection of economic inequality and digital participation. Activists with greater financial stability are able to devote more time and energy to online organizing, thereby gaining more visibility and influence within the move-

ment. Conversely, those who must work full-time or manage other responsibilities are less able to participate, leading to a stratification of influence that mirrors broader social inequalities. The digital sphere, far from being a neutral or egalitarian space, thus becomes a site where existing hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced.

HOWEVER, DESPITE recognizing that existing media systems and practices reproduce inequalities and contribute to the emergence of informal hierarchies within the movement, many activists were willing to tolerate this state of affairs precisely because they saw no viable way to change the system. For example, when asked about the role of media in FAR, one activist (Lana, October 2022) initially listed several negative effects – such as the reinforcement of social inequalities – and then concluded, “Unfortunately, it is something we have to accept, like the absurdity of capitalism”. Other activists, though not all, similarly acknowledged the detrimental effects of media infrastructures, viewing them as structural conditions that must be endured rather than transformed. In their view, the logic of contemporary digital media systems is so deeply entrenched that it leaves little room for meaningful change.

This position exactly reflects what I propose to understand as a *media realist* sensibility: a recognition among activists that digital media both enable and constrain political participation, and, simultaneously, that this situation cannot be changed. Many FAR activists were acutely aware that digital communication channels and the broader media system perpetuate inequalities and informal hierarchies. However, given the central role of the media in organizing and sustaining FAR’s activities, respondents were willing to tolerate the negative effects of the media system in order to continue their resistance against the war and the authoritarian regime.

THIS PRAGMATIC acceptance of media constraints was also evident in the case study of the feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine*. Two journalists who participated in the interviews and discussed the media strategy of the feminist webzine offered critical assessments of *Wonderzine*’s publication strategies. One described the outlet as an example of “neoliberal feminism”, more interested in commodifying feminism as a brand than in promoting feminist values. According to this critique, *Wonderzine*’s editorial strategy prioritized marketability and aesthetic appeal over political content, thereby diluting and commodifying the subversive potential of feminism. The second journalist echoed this critique, arguing that *Wonderzine* created a commercialized and glamorized version of feminism that often failed to address the real needs of women in Russia. She noted that the webzine primarily catered to the interests of “wealthy Muscovites”, leaving other groups – particularly those from peripheral

regions, and the working class – underrepresented.⁷² Moreover, as netnographic observations demonstrated, the readers of the magazine often used comment functions to complain about its Moscow-centric and upper-middle class outlook, which made many women feel excluded and marginalized within *Wonderzine*’s version of feminism and empowerment.⁷³

Despite these critiques, both journalists acknowledged that *Wonderzine* had made a positive contribution to the development of public feminist discourse in Russia. In their view, the liberalization and glamorization of feminism represented a strategic adaptation to the existing media environment. By aligning feminist content with the aesthetic and commercial norms of Russian hipster media, *Wonderzine* was able to reach a broader audience and normalize feminist discourse in a conservative political climate. This strategy, while not without its drawbacks, was seen by respondents as a necessary trade-off in the struggle for feminism’s visibility and legitimacy.

“ACTIVISTS’ AWARENESS OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ICTS OFTEN RESULTED IN A PRAGMATICAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE EXISTING ‘RULES OF THE GAME.’”

THIS PERSPECTIVE further illustrates the *media realist* sensibility shared by many feminist activists and media professionals. It involves a dual awareness: on the one hand, a critical understanding of how media systems reproduce inequality and shape discourse in exclusionary ways; on the other hand, a pragmatic willingness to work within these constraints to achieve strategic goals. In the case of *Wonderzine*, this meant accepting the limitations of commercial media in order to insert feminist narratives into the public sphere. For FAR activists, it

meant navigating the digital divide while continuing to build solidarity and resistance in the face of authoritarian repression.

“All Is Fair in War”? Media tactics between strong and weak cynicisms

As demonstrated in the previous section, at the organizational level, activists’ awareness of the negative effects of ICTs often resulted in a pragmatic acceptance of the existing “rules of the game.”⁷⁴ However, at the level of planning specific actions, this awareness opened up space for strategic maneuvering and the expansion of possible tactical repertoires. It also introduced a new dimension of “effectiveness” in evaluating media practices. Yet, because the rules dictated by digital media systems do not always align with – and at times directly contradict – feminist values and political commitments, the development of tactics adapted to these systems often gave rise to new moral dilemmas, shifting regimes of legitimation and producing affective tensions.

In navigating these contradictions, activists cultivated what I, following Peter Sloterdijk, refer to as a *cynical sensibility*. Sloterdijk describes modern cynicism as an “enlightened false consciousness”⁷⁵ – a mode of action in which the agents are fully aware that they are acting against normative ideals, yet proceed “without illusions”, having been “dragged down by the power of

things.” However, unlike Sloterdijk, who focuses on cynical “reason”, I prefer to speak about “sensibility”, in order to emphasize the affective and moral dimensions of activists’ experiences. Rather than a purely intellectual stance, *media realist* sensibility in this context is lived and felt – it is a response to the ethical discomfort of acting within systems one does not fully endorse.

Within this framework, I distinguish between strong and weak forms of cynical sensibility, both of which emerge as expressions of *media realism*. These modalities reflect different ways in which activists reconcile their political commitments with the structural constraints and contradictions of the media systems they must navigate. While strong cynicism entails a more radical instrumentalism, weak cynicism is marked by ambivalence, ethical hesitation, and a desire to remain accountable to feminist values even while operating within the demands of media logic.

Strong cynical sensibility

The most explicit and strong manifestation of the cynicism inherent in *media realism* among all three case studies can be found in the case of “Photoshop activism” – a feminist protest action that took place in Moscow in 2017.⁷⁶ As part of this protest, feminist activists created and distributed a fake photograph, which they deliberately sent to allied journalists invited to cover the event. Alongside this, they published a “Manifesto of Photoshop Activism”,⁷⁷ in which the organizers explained and justified the use of fake images in feminist protest. As I argue, the logic behind this action closely aligns with the contours of the *media realist* sensibility as outlined in this article.

The “Photoshop activists” had a clear understanding of the negative aspects of the Russian post-truth media regime, which they described as a propaganda tool designed to manipulate public opinion. At the same time, they considered this media regime to be unchangeable “reality” – a structure so deeply entrenched that it could not be transformed. Therefore, instead of developing a critical approach towards the existing media regime, activists opted to embrace its logic.

Within a *media realist* sensibility, actors perceive media systems as largely unchangeable, meaning the only viable strategy for them is to adapt: to accept the existing rules of the game and attempt to pragmatically use them to their advantage. In a post-truth media environment where effectiveness is measured not by informational objectivity or ethical consistency, but by visibility and virality, the content producers, including activists, are incentivized to prioritize attention over accuracy. In this logic, if a fake image can generate more media coverage and social media engagement than a real one, then its use becomes not only acceptable but strategically justified.⁷⁸ And this logic was fully embraced by the protest organizers, who defended the use of the fabricated image by referring to the media and public attention it generated: “We did a great job! Whether the context [of public discussion] is positive or negative doesn’t matter – the word ‘feminists’ is now on everyone’s lips”.⁷⁹

What makes the case of the Photoshop activists an example of strong cynicism is the fully conscious and unapologetic nature



Easter-themed cards with anti-war messages that FAR encouraged supporters to circulate. Left: “This Easter, no matter how you howl, no matter how you cry, there is only one problem: God’s Son has risen, but yours will never rise again”. Right: “Enough war”.



Left: “Happy Holy Resurrection Day! Happy Ascension Day! Wishes for warmth, happiness, joy, goodness, so that there is no war on the mind of my country, Peace in the heart, peace in the house, there is enough grief, there is enough blood, it is not for this that Christ was taken down from the cross for us!”

Right: “Christ is risen and the angels rejoice, And they kiss the brightened faces, And they close the eyes of all the dead, But the dead will not recognize this... War on Easter! The blood of living people! What has become of us, with my homeland? Christ is risen, oh miracle of miracles... But what did he see when he rose again?”

PHOTO: TELEGRAM



FAR activists spray-painted “You didn’t give birth for war” under the windows of maternity hospitals in four Russian cities in August 2022. The action generated significant attention, but also provoked a wave of criticism: the activists were accused of blaming mothers for the war, and of lacking empathy toward women who had just given birth.

PHOTO: FEMAGAINSTWAR

of their approach. The organizers and supporters of the protest actively sought to legitimize their tactics, either by outright denying or significantly downplaying the potential negative consequences of deceiving media and manipulating the public.⁸⁰ In this regard, the protest organizers reproduced a “global cynical sensibility that takes for granted the belief that all public discourse is fake, that words do not match actions, and specifically that self-interest is behind all claims to [...] objectivity.”⁸¹ In their view, their tactic⁸² was legitimate precisely because it succeeded in attracting substantial media and social media attention. Thus, the pragmatic dimension of the protest entirely displaced any normative concerns over moral or ethical value of objective information and public trust. The case of Photoshop activism illustrates that, at its extreme, a *media realist* sensibility risks uncritical accommodation to dominant media logic, thereby subordinating or even displacing other political commitments and concerns.

Weak cynical sensibility

Unlike the “Photoshop activists”, FAR has consistently positioned itself in direct opposition to the *modus operandi* of Russian state propaganda. One of the movement’s central goals is to deliver accurate and truthful information about the war in Ukraine to Russian audiences.⁸³ Nearly all FAR activists interviewed emphasized both the ethical and political importance of factual, objective information. Several explicitly stated that they considered the use of fakes in activist strategies unacceptable – even if such tactics might be effective in attracting attention or discrediting the Putin regime. In this sense, the instrumental and cynical approach to media that defines “Photoshop activism” is not a core feature of FAR’s media strategy.

Nevertheless, a weak form of cynical sensibility toward media practices was present in the narratives of at least some FAR activists. One such narrative emerged during a conversation with Lana, who discussed FAR’s efforts to reach broader working-class audiences in Russia – beyond the more familiar

circles of feminist and anti-war activists, whom she described somewhat ironically as the “hipster latte crowd” (“хипста латэ тусовочка”). FAR’s tactics aimed at engaging new audiences involved producing content that aesthetically mimicked popular digital media formats – such as holiday greeting cards for WhatsApp chats and the social network Odnoklassniki [Classmates], memes, GIFs, and even prayers⁸⁴ – while embedding anti-war messages within them.

FOR INSTANCE, among the Easter-themed cards that FAR encouraged supporters to circulate were messages ranging from the straightforward “Enough War” to the more macabre and affectively charged “God’s son has risen, but yours never will.”⁸⁵ These provocative juxtapositions were designed to emulate working-class aesthetics of digital communication and thus reach wider audiences who might otherwise be unreceptive to overtly oppositional content. Moreover, as one anonymous reviewer of this article rightly pointed out, such messaging offers a fascinating example of how Russian feminists are recontextualizing conservative religious discourse in order to generate a subversive populist aesthetics.⁸⁶ At the same time, at least some activists saw this approach as problematic from the standpoint of progressive feminist ethics. For example, reflecting on these tactics, Lana offered a critical yet ambivalent assessment:

It’s brutal, in the sense that you’re assuming a certain group of people is incapable of understanding your sophisticated, rational discourse, and so you decide to send them a postcard with Jason Statham and a wolf.⁸⁷

She continued, “From the perspective of 21st-century activism, this is really not okay.” Yet despite her ethical and theoretical reservations, Lana ultimately endorsed the strategy on pragmatic grounds, stating, “In war, all means are fair.” In her view, when “bombs are falling nonstop”, moral concerns can be temporarily set aside in favor of the effectiveness of anti-war activism. She

concluded the discussion of the Easter-themed digital greeting cards with a telling remark: “If you interview me after the war, I’ll probably say different things – I’ll say it was wrong, that it caused harm, and so on.”

This moment of reflection captures the internal tension at the heart of *media realism*. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of ethical principles in activist communication. On the other hand, there is a recognition that effective digital communication requires means that contradict these principles. While the use of popular memes may yield some results by appealing to a broader audience, such tactics imply the reproduction of social and symbolic hierarchies in which middle-class, digitally savvy activists occupy a higher position than common people. However, Lana made it clear that she considered such tactics to be legitimate only in the context of the urgency and brutality of war – conditions which demand tactical flexibility, even if that means compromising on ethics. In that case, the partial suspension of feminist values is not dictated by the outright cynical modality and a wholesale embrace of manipulation, but by a context-driven adaptation to the constraints of the media environment and the pressure of the political situation.

ANOTHER FAR ACTIVIST, Zhenya, shared during our interview her reflections on the protest action “You didn’t give birth for war” (Ты родила не для войны).⁸⁸ As part of this campaign, FAR activists spray-painted this slogan under the windows of maternity hospitals in four Russian cities. According to Zhenya, the action generated significant attention and was widely discussed on social media, but it also provoked a wave of criticism: the activists were accused of blaming mothers for the war, and of lacking empathy toward women who had just given birth.

In response to this backlash, FAR organized an internal online meeting to reflect on the feedback and the outcomes of the action. As Zhenya recalled:

We discussed it and came to the conclusion that, in general, our actions should be exactly like this – they should generate hype. They shouldn’t be soft, white, and fluffy. That’s the point.

Thus, Zhenya acknowledged that “softer” actions tend to receive far less media attention and public engagement than those that provoke controversy or strong emotional reactions. In her view – and seemingly in the view of other activists – this justified the use of more confrontational tactics in the movement’s communication strategy. What we see here is another instance of *media realism*: Zhenya accepts the existing logic of media attention as a

given, a reality that cannot be changed. Rather than resisting it, she adapts to it, seeking to maximize the visibility of anti-war messages by working within the rules of the current media system.

At the same time, Zhenya was careful to emphasize that, despite the negative feedback, she considered the action ethically sound. The ethical legitimacy of the protest, she argued, was grounded in the identity of the activist who conceived it:

The person who came up with the idea [of this protest] is a mother of several children, so it’s absolutely ethical, yes.

This justification suggests that for Zhenya, and likely for other FAR activists, the acceptability of provocative tactics depends not only on their strategic effectiveness but also on whether they remain within certain ethical boundaries. These boundaries are not fixed or universal but are negotiated collectively within the movement, often in relation to the identities and lived experiences of those involved.

“BOTH ACTIVISTS DEMONSTRATE A CLEAR AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEMATIC LOGIC THAT GOVERNS CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ATTENTION, AND BOTH ARE WILLING TO ENGAGE WITH THIS LOGIC TO AMPLIFY ANTI-WAR MESSAGES.”

Taken together, the cases of Lana and Zhenya illustrate the complex and often contradictory ways in which FAR activists navigate the media environment through what I describe as a weak cynical sensibility. Both activists demonstrate a clear awareness of the problematic logic that governs contemporary media attention, and both are willing to engage with this logic to amplify anti-war messages. However, their approaches differ in tone and emphasis. Lana expressed a more self-critical and ambivalent stance, openly acknowledging the ethical discomfort of simplifying messages for broader audiences, even as she

defended the tactic as legitimate under wartime conditions. Zhenya, by contrast, embraces a more assertive pragmatism, justifying provocative actions not only through their effectiveness but also by anchoring them in a certain understanding of identity politics and its ethics. What unites both cases is a shared tension between ethical commitment and strategic adaptation – a recognition that in a media landscape shaped by spectacle and polarization, visibility often comes at the cost of moral clarity. Rather than fully rejecting or embracing this reality, FAR activists negotiate it cautiously, seeking to balance integrity with impact in a context where neither can be taken for granted. This example further illustrates how *media realism* operates not as a fixed doctrine but as a flexible sensibility – one that allows activists to navigate the tensions between ethics and effectiveness, visibility and responsibility, provocation and care. It also shows how feminist activists in Russia are constantly negotiating the boundaries of what is acceptable, effective, and justifiable in a media landscape shaped by repressions and propaganda.

By distinguishing between strong and weak cynicism as expressions of *media realism*, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by feminist activists. Rather than evaluating their choices through a binary lens of right or wrong, *media realism* invites us to consider the situated judgments activists make under pressure, and the ways in which these judgments reflect broader tensions between ethical and tactical/strategical concerns.

Media realism, as a broader framework, encompasses both cynical modalities. It captures the shared recognition among activists that political communication today requires constant negotiation between ideals and constraints, between what is desirable and what is possible. In the context of Russian feminist activism – marked by war, a conservative political turn, repression, and exile – these tensions are especially acute. Activists must navigate a media landscape that is both a tool of state repression and control and a potential site of resistance. As a critical concept, *media realism* does not resolve these contradictions, but it helps us understand how activists live and act within them.

Conclusions

This article has introduced the concept of *media realism* as a framework for understanding the political sensibilities that emerge from activists' engagement with digital media under constraining circumstances. Grounded in empirical research with Russian feminist activists, *media realism* captures the affective, ethical, and strategic tensions that define contemporary digital activism in authoritarian contexts. It foregrounds the ways in which activists experience ambivalences and contradictions within digital infrastructures. However, the conceptual framework of *media realism*, as elaborated in this article, has its limitations. First, while it offers a valuable lens for interpreting activist experiences and tactical choices, it risks overemphasizing adaptation at the expense of resistance. By focusing on how activists work within existing media logics, *media realism* may inadvertently obscure moments of rupture, refusal, or experimentation that challenge dominant ICTs infrastructures.

Second, the concept is currently grounded in a specific geopolitical and cultural context – Russia under authoritarian rule and a conservative turn. While this specificity is a strength, future research could explore how *media realism* applies across different regimes, movements, and media ecologies. Comparative studies could help assess whether similar sensibilities emerge in other illiberal or hybrid regimes, or even in liberal democracies whose networked publics are shaped by platform capitalism. Moreover, longitudinal designs could follow how *media realism* changes across protest phases and in relation to activists' evolving experiences.

Third, *media realism* primarily captures the perspectives of activists who are already digitally literate and actively engaged with media systems. As the article notes, working-class and older activists are often underrepresented in digital movements, and their experiences may not align with the sensibilities described here. Future research should therefore attend more closely to the exclusions and silences within activists narratives, and ex-

plore how digital inequalities shape not just access to political movements but also political imagination.

Moreover, in this article, *media realism* is elaborated through the experiences of activists using digital media in political practice. Extending the concept's reach to other actor groups – influencers, semi-professional creators, brand managers, and everyday social media users – would test its analytical elasticity by examining how digital media pressures and incentives are experienced beyond activist milieus.

FINALLY, WHILE *media realism* helps us understand how activists navigate ethical dilemmas, it does not offer any normative guidance on how to resolve them. This is both a strength and a limitation. As an analytical framework, *media realism* resists moralizing judgments. Yet, as scholars and activists, we might also ask: What kinds of media practices are not only effective, but just? What forms of networked resistance can challenge not only authoritarian regimes but also the logics of the platforms themselves? In this sense, *media realism* is not an endpoint but rather an invitation – to think critically, and to imagine alternatives. ❌

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- 86 One can recall the similar discursive operation within Pussy Riot’s performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February 2012. See Sergei Prozorov, “Pussy Riot and the Politics of Profanation: Parody, Performativity, Veridiction,” *Political Studies* vol. 62, no. 4 (2014): 766–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12047>.
- 87 In this context, “a postcard with Jason Statham and a wolf” evokes a well-known meme genre – images of the actor and/or lone wolves that index hegemonic masculinity and aspirational toughness; when circulated non-ironically, such memes are commonly read as kitsch and markers of “backward” taste in the Russian digital vernacular.
- 88 <https://t.me/femagainstwar/4477>.



A protester rallies against Russia's "partial" military mobilization in the republic of Buryatia's capital, Ulan-Ude, in September 2022.

PHOTO: T.ME/BAIKAL_PEOPLE

Anti-war movements from Russia's national republics

Intersections of gender, sexuality, and decoloniality

by Eeva Kuikka

abstract

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, various ethnic protest and anti-war movements from Russia's national republics have called for decolonization. While the focus of these initiatives lies in regional politics and ethnic and Indigenous rights, the movements also address women's and LGBTQ rights. Based on content analysis of seven ethnic anti-war initiatives, this article examines the themes and frameworks through which questions related to gender and sexuality are addressed within the activist agendas of these initiatives. The analysis shows that while these questions play only a minor role in the ethnic anti-war activism, they are used to articulate systemic oppression and the harmful impact of Russian state policies on people in the national republics. Taken together, the ways in which gender and sexuality are discussed bring out the activists' search for a discursive position between Russian and Western political and discursive regimes.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic minorities, anti-war activism, ethnic activism, decolonial activism, decolonial feminism.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not only shaken the global geopolitical landscape, but it has also had unprecedented consequences inside the Russian Federation. Already in spring 2022, it became clear that military casualties among soldiers from "national minorities" such as Buryats, Tuvans, and Dagestanis were significantly more frequent than among soldiers from Russian capitals. The ratio between ethnic Russian and non-Russian soldiers sent to Ukraine became even more disproportionate after the "partial mobilization" declared in September 2022.¹ The war and the uneven rates of recruitment and casualties among non-Russian soldiers have sparked resistance among ethnic minorities. The first ethnic anti-war movement, the Free Buryatia Foundation, was founded in March 2022 followed by several other Indigenous and ethnic protest movements and activist organizations. This activism quickly developed from mere anti-war resistance into a broader decolonial movement that both highlights Russia's

colonial and imperial relations with its national republics and ethnic minorities and voices demands for self-determination and cultural rights. In 2023, the Russian government listed many founders and publicly operating members of these organizations as foreign agents, and, since late July 2024, most of them have been designated as extremists. Due to this political repression and Russia's heavy sanctions for public protesting, social media platforms have become an important forum for these initiatives to disseminate decolonial and anti-war messages. Therefore, in this article I address ethnic initiatives and their approaches to decolonization through a reflexive thematic analysis of their social media content.



Flag map of Russian Federal Subjects.

MAP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

IN THE CONTEXT of Russia and ethnic anti-war initiatives, decolonization appears foremost as the demand for social, economic, and environmental justice; regional self-determination; the revitalization of local languages, cultures, and traditions; and revealing and resisting Russia's imperial and colonial practices and history.² The scale of issues that the ethnic initiatives address as part of their decolonial agenda is broad, ranging from racism, institutionalized Russification, and imbalanced socioeconomic relations between Moscow and the national republics to environmental rights. In addition, the decolonial initiatives have taken an active stance against Russia's tightening neo-conservative legislation restricting women's and LGBTQ rights and they express solidarity with feminist and LGBTQ activist movements. As Vlada Baranova points out, this marks a significant change compared to the ethnic activism practiced in Russia prior to the war, in which feminist and LGBTQ issues largely remained unaddressed.³ According to Khanda Namzhil and Alfira Tuktash, the new decolonial initiatives "prioritize dialog and allyship between different underrepresented groups, focusing on the convergence of the collective experiences of Russian colonialism".⁴ While earlier scholarship has recognized that gender equality and LGBTQ rights are incorporated into contemporary decolonial activism, this article explores and analyzes this observation in more depth by asking how these issues are approached by decolonial initiatives: which themes and frameworks the initiatives use to address questions of gender and sexuality, how these intersect with questions of ethnicity and (de)coloniality, and how activists' approaches relate to other activist discourses?

The analysis focuses on seven decolonial and/or ethnic initiatives that use digital platforms for activist purposes: the Free Buryatia Foundation, the Free Yakutia Foundation, the Indigenous of Russia Foundation, Asians of Russia, Serditaia Chuvashia [Angry Chuvashia], Oirad-Jisän, and Komi Daily. Most of these initiatives focus on specific ethnicities or regions, while the Indigenous of Russia and Asians of Russia advocate for Indigenous people's rights more generally. Some of the projects emerged after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while Asians of Russia, Komi Daily, and Serditaia Chuvashia were launched already earlier. Primarily these initiatives operate on Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, often maintaining accounts on several or all of these platforms; Serditaia Chuvashia is an exception, operating solely on Telegram. Some of the projects also maintain separate websites. Based on the most followed social media account (which for most projects is Instagram), the follower numbers of the projects vary from around 1700 (Komi Daily) to 148,000 (Asians of Russia). Most initiatives examined in this study label themselves explicitly as decolonial – Asians of Russia adopted this stance only after February 2022. Serditaia Chuvashia forms an exception here as it uses very little the language of colonization, although it shares with the other movements an anti-war agenda, critical stance towards the prevailing political system and the aim of revitalizing Chuvash language and culture. This difference is also reflected in Serditaia Chuvashia's stance towards the Russian opposition in comparison to the others: Whereas most ethnic projects criticize Russia's liberal opposition for sharing the imperialist views of Russia's present

“THE DECOLONIAL INITIATIVES HAVE TAKEN AN ACTIVE STANCE AGAINST RUSSIA’S TIGHTENING NEO-CONSERVATIVE LEGISLATION RESTRICTING WOMEN’S AND LGBTQ RIGHTS, AND THEY EXPRESS SOLIDARITY WITH FEMINIST AND LGBTQ ACTIVIST MOVEMENTS.”

government,⁵ the founder of Serditaia Chuvashia is the former campaign manager of the late Alexei Navalny, and the project is openly sympathetic to his work and legacy. While these movements do not form a homogeneous group but appear as distinct yet collaborating projects, they all advocate for ethnic and Indigenous rights, the protection of cultural identities, regional self-determination, and democratization. All these initiatives also link women's and LGBTQ rights, to these broader goals.

Coloniality of gender and sexuality in the context of Russia and the Soviet Union

In the 2020s, decolonization has become a key concept in both activism and academia. While the earlier use of the term referred primarily to the undoing of colonial rule especially in Africa and Asia, decolonial scholarship has highlighted how, despite the end of formal colonialism, colonial domination continues to operate in power relations and knowledge production by positioning Western modernity as the standard and casting non-Western ways of being and knowing as inferior.⁶

As decolonial feminists have pointed out, colonization and coloniality are inextricably connected to conceptions of gender and sexuality, insofar as these categories have been historically shaped by colonial structures. According to María Lugones,⁷ the binary gender conception and heterosexuality should not be understood as universal systems but rather as colonial constructions that were superimposed with force onto Indigenous cultures by European colonialism, destroying sexual and gender diversity in colonized areas. In the context of Russia and the Soviet Union, Lugones' theory has been applied by Madina Tlostanova,⁸ who argues that the coloniality of dichotomous and heterosexist gender structures is built within the universalizing ideals of modernity. In her *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, Tlostanova demonstrates how Russia adopted the inherently colonial epistemic system of modernity – its gender and sexual norms included – from the West and applied it to its own racialized others.⁹ For example, Russian colonization of the Caucasus and Central Asia from the 19th century onwards “condemned, ridiculed and eventually destroyed” non-binary and non-heteronormative traditions and gender expressions.¹⁰

IN RUSSIA'S CASE, however, the colonization process and the resulting colonial identities were greatly affected by Russia's own precarious position as a “secondary empire”, that is, an empire that had itself been marked as subaltern by European empires.¹¹ While Russia imposed colonial gender and sexual norms onto the peoples it colonized, only a few centuries earlier it had been itself condemned by Western diplomats for the widespread preva-

lence of “sodomist” practices, which were criminalized only in the 18th century as part of Russia's Westernization efforts.¹²

According to Tlostanova, the colonial intersection of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in the non-Slavic borderlands of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union was embedded in the modernizing mission that Russia carried out in those areas as part of its colonial expansion.¹³ Especially during the Soviet era, the main narrative presented Soviet power as a liberator and civilizer of the eastern regions of the country, emancipating the subdued women of the East from imperial colonization, backward local habits, and religious (especially Islamic) authorities.¹⁴ Even if the most stereotypical view of the submissive women of the East concerned predominantly Islamic regions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, a similar image of women as passive and subordinate to male dominance was attached to other non-Slavic women of the country as well.¹⁵ However, as Yulia Gradszkova shows, despite the anti-colonial rhetoric in the Soviet Union, this emancipation narrative was based on orientalist and colonial assumptions and practices. Non-Russian women were seen as “objects of education and civilizing practices” provided by Russians, who represented European civilization and modernity.¹⁶ Hence, the emancipation project aligned in many ways with the colonial modernization projects of European empires.¹⁷ The Soviet narrative also excluded all anti-colonial or “bourgeois” women's activism predating the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and remained silent about the repression and deportations of non-Russian ethnicities during the Stalinist era.¹⁸

Tlostanova's and Gradszkova's studies examine the effects of Russian colonization on gender and sexual formations among

“NON-RUSSIAN WOMEN WERE SEEN AS ‘OBJECTS OF EDUCATION AND CIVILIZING PRACTICES’ PROVIDED BY RUSSIANS, WHO REPRESENTED EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION AND MODERNITY.”

Russia's racialized others during the Imperial and Soviet periods, yet the emancipation narrative presenting the Soviet Union as the liberator of the subordinate women of the East has prevailed until the present day. In recent decades, it has even been re-enforced by the neo-imperial narratives of Russia's benevolent civilizing mission in its colonized regions, through which Russians have re-established the idea of the superiority of Russian culture.¹⁹ As Victoria Kravtsova demonstrates in her analysis of Guzel Yakhina's novel

Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes from 2015, this narrative and the coloniality embedded within it are also reproduced in contemporary cultural production.²⁰ The stereotype of submissive and oppressed Muslim women in Russia's Islamic regions and marginalization of feminist initiatives in national republics have persisted even in the feminist spheres in Russia's metropolises.²¹ Similarly, as Marina Yusupova argues, colonial narratives also shape contemporary Russian conceptions of masculinity by valorizing Western forms of manhood as civilized and rejecting racialized, especially Muslim, masculinities as backward and uncivilized.²²

At the same time, scholars have brought out the imperialism



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Guzel Yakhina's novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* was published in 2015.



PHOTO: LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands by Madina Tlostanova was published in 2010.

embedded in discourses that equate Western models of feminism and LGBTQ rights with modernity and progress while positioning Russia and Russian feminism as inherently “other” and perpetually lagging behind Western forms of gender and sexual equality, thereby reinscribing Russia as a secondary or subaltern empire.²³ By analyzing the ways in which ethnic activists address questions of gender and sexuality, this article examines how the reciprocal construction of these categories within the context of Russian coloniality is articulated by the decolonial initiatives.

Methodology

The basis of the study lies in netnographic²⁴ observation of Indigenous, decolonial, and ethnic social media activism in Russia since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This has afforded me a comprehensive understanding of the emergence and development of decolonial discourse in ethnic anti-war activism, its articulation in online spaces, and the range of initiatives within this field. Based on ethnographic observation, I contacted activist projects through direct messages on Instagram, Telegram, or email to obtain consent to analyze their social media publications for scholarly purposes. As a non-Indigenous, Finnish academic based in a Western research institution, I am aware of the intersecting structures that risk reinforcing epistemological (neo-)imperialism and other forms of power imbalance in relation to the activists whose content I analyze.²⁵ Therefore, only the seven above-mentioned projects that granted permission to use their social media content as research material were included in the study.

When giving their consent to the analysis of their publications, the projects also informed me of their preferences regarding anonymization. Notably, all projects that granted permission to participate in the study also expressed a clear preference to be identified by name; some projects even stated this as a precondition for their agreement to participate. As Sandra Jeppesen and Paola Sartoretto note, requiring anonymity from researched media activists “can be interpreted as yet another structural mechanism for silencing their voice”, potentially obscuring the author-

ship of ideas expressed by the activists.²⁶ Accordingly, to openly credit the activist projects for their work, I use project names and provide references to the cited materials. Given the persecution of ethnic and decolonial activists by the Russian state, this decision was not straightforward. However, because my analysis focuses on publicly available materials produced by collectives rather than individuals, and because the activists operate in relatively safe environments, I saw that anonymizing the projects against their wishes would have been ethically questionable.

The research material of the study consists of social media publications by the seven activist projects and movements that address women, gender, feminism, or LGBTQ issues. The publications were collected through a systematic review of the projects’ feeds on Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube between 2022 and 2024. In total, the material includes 73 Instagram publications, 38 Telegram publications, and three YouTube videos. It should be noted that same publications shared on different platforms were counted only once. Similarly, reposts of content created by other projects were excluded from the analysis, whereas collaborative publications or publications addressing other movements were included. All collected material was openly available on the projects’ social media pages and accessible to audiences without any limitations. Instead of downloading or taking screenshots of the publications, the data archive consists of detailed notes on the content, along with links to relevant materials, which were accessed directly through the platforms for closer visual and textual analysis. As this necessitated regular re-visiting of the material, it also served as a means of verifying that the posts had not been removed since the data collection.²⁷ The data was collected retrospectively and therefore it excludes ephemeral content such as Instagram “stories”, which remain visible for only 24 hours. The collected research material was analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis²⁸ that was informed by the framework of the coloniality of gender presented above.

As the data was collected only from activist projects that granted their consent for the research, this study is not an exhaustive overview of decolonial and ethnic anti-war activism.



Over 500 women gathered in Yakutsk in September 2022 to oppose the war and the mobilization of local men. In the protest, the women danced the traditional circle dance, *ohuokhai*.

PHOTO: SCREENPRINT, ICTIMAI TV/YOUTUBE

Due to ongoing safety concerns, I also chose not to complement the content analysis with interview data. For the same reasons, the analysis of followers' bases and online comments has likewise been excluded from the study. However, although the study cannot draw conclusions about individual activists' experiences nor examine how their activist messages are received by target audiences, I see that the analysis of the projects' media content provides important insights into the integration of gender and sexuality into ethnic anti-war and decolonial activism.

Thematic frameworks for addressing gender and sexuality in ethnic activism

Based on a reflexive thematic analysis of the research data, three main themes were identified: 1) the social role of women in non-Russian communities; 2) feminist issues and feminism; 3) LGBTQ rights and ethnic activism. It is nevertheless important to point out that while several publications fit into a single category, many intersected across two or even all three themes. This section provides an overview of these themes and the types of publications that they encompass, while in the following discussion section I aim at offering more in-depth analysis of their significance.

1. Social role of women in non-Russian communities

Women's participation in public life and their role as agents of social change were addressed by every activist project examined in the study. Initially, this topic emerged in relation to the war in Ukraine, as the ethnic anti-war movements underlined women's active role in resisting mobilization and organizing anti-war rallies, often praising their courage to "defend not only their own rights but also the rights of their close ones".²⁹ Such publications were also the first instances of women-specific content published by the movements in 2022. A notable example of how women's protests are addressed by ethnic activists can be found in publications discussing the women's anti-war rally held in Yakutsk in September 2022, during which over 500 women gathered to oppose the war and the mobilization of local men. In the protest, the women danced the traditional circle dance, *ohuokhai*, which since the fall of the Soviet Union has become one the most impor-

tant manifestations of Sakha culture and identity.³⁰ This protest is repeatedly recalled in the publications of the Free Yakutia Foundation both as a demonstration of women's social importance and as an expression of Sakha national unity against the war and the colonial power sending Sakha men to Ukraine.³¹ More broadly, women's social mobilization has characterized resistance to Russia's invasion of Ukraine throughout the country. Notably, the Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR) has become one of the leading anti-war movements during the war,³² and the ethnic initiatives have collaborated with FAR, for example, by contributing to issues of *Zhenskaia pravda*, FAR's anti-war samizdat journal³³, published in different Indigenous languages³⁴.

In bringing out and promoting women's active role in anti-war mobilization in the national republics, the ethnic activist movements also draw on local histories. Some of the publications present examples of local female intellectuals, professionals, and advocates of women's rights from the pre-Soviet times until the present day, while others shed light on the various roles that women have in different non-Russian cultures and communities.³⁵ By promoting and raising awareness of publicly engaged women in national histories of the republics, the publications create a clear parallel between these figures and socially active women today, who can be seen as continuations of this lineage. Often, these posts are published in connection with International Women's Day, and they openly challenge its depoliticization into a mere celebration of women's aesthetic value or domestic roles.³⁶ Raising awareness of women's roles in national histories as well as highlighting historically and culturally significant female figures also aligns with the movements' broader mission to foreground the culture and history of non-Russian ethnicities as part of the decolonial agenda. As the Free Buryatia Foundation states, "decolonization is [...] knowledge of one's own history, women's history included".³⁷ Accordingly, the movements make an explicit effort to include in their broader informational work also women's histories that are often left in the margins of hegemonic historical narratives.

AT THE SAME TIME, these publications reflect the ethnic anti-war movements' commitment to critically re-evaluating the histori-

cal narratives and stereotypes used to justify Russian and Soviet colonization, such as the emancipation narrative of the allegedly subordinate women of the East. On the one hand, the examples of historically significant women and women's role in non-Russian cultures question the one-dimensional stereotype of women as mere servants in non-Russian cultures and passive "pupils" educated by modernized Russian women to fight for their rights.³⁸ On the other hand, the publications point to the complex and multilayered effects of Russian and Soviet colonization on women's position in the colonized societies. For example, a publication by the Free Buryatia Foundation argues that while the Soviet era increased Buryat women's social mobility and access to education, their earlier social marginalization resulted rather from colonial structures imposed by the Qing dynasty and the Russian Empire than from Buryat culture and traditions.³⁹ Similarly, a publication by Asians of Russia demonstrates how these stereotypes and narratives gain new meanings and layers in the colonial situation of the present day.⁴⁰ In this publication, the project debunks a patriarchal portrayal of Kalmyk wives as "standing in the corner while the husband is eating at the table" and "washing and kissing the feet of one's husband" presented by a Kalmykian political assistant at the State Duma in the national television.⁴¹ As the project points out how the idealization of patriarchal values follows rather the current position of the Russian government than Kalmyk traditions, it reveals an interesting re-invention of gendered colonial narratives: Instead of promoting the Soviet emancipation narrative, this new rhetoric presents the patriarchal gender order as a naturalized and preferable structure in non-Russian cultures and societies. Nevertheless, both narratives foster the cliché of non-Russian cultures as inherently patriarchal and non-Russian women as docile and submissive. The need to promote such an image reflects the broader neo-conservative climate of the Russian state and it can also be interpreted as a response to the increased importance of women in anti-war activism in the federal republics, aimed at undermining their growing role by reinforcing the colonial gender system.

2. *Feminist issues and feminism*

Even if ethnic activist initiatives and projects do not explicitly label themselves as feminist, they nevertheless participate in making visible issues typically raised by feminist activism. In particular, the movements address the issues of domestic violence and abortion rights. On the one hand, this reflects the ongoing discussion and juridical changes in Russia, such as the debates around domestic violence and its partial decriminalization in 2017, the ban on the promotion of childfree ideology and restrictions on access to abortions.⁴² On the other hand, while Russia's neo-conservative turn to traditional family values is a

federal phenomenon, ethnic activists approach it from a local perspective by revealing high rates of gender-based violence in the regions⁴³ and criticizing regional anti-abortion campaigns and local support for restricting reproductive rights.⁴⁴ Often the initiatives also connect these issues to the on-going war in Ukraine, for example by revealing how men who are convicted of violence towards women avoid punishment by volunteering for the war in Ukraine, or by highlighting the contradiction between Russia's demographic crisis and the mobilization of men to the front. By exposing gaps in legislation, the gendered consequences of the war, and the state-driven promotion of "traditional family values," the initiatives demonstrate the myriad ways in which Russian policies and social structures harm non-Russian women in the republics. At the same time, the movements criticize governmental or state-run women's organizations that echo pro-war and neo-conservative stances while staying silent about the rampant gender-based issues.⁴⁵ Hence, domestic violence and reproductive rights are framed not as separate feminist concerns but as integral to broader anti-war and anti-government critique.

Baranova links the ethnic activists' emerged attention of ethnic activists' engagement to gender-based discrimination and women's rights with their collaboration, solidarity and convergences with FAR.⁴⁶ I see that the projects' engagement with these issues also reflects a broader rise of feminist topics in Russophone media prior to the full-scale invasion. As Saara Raitainen et al. note, during the 2010s, expanded internet access, new media formats, global media trends, and Russia's increasingly conservative gender politics led to the popularization of feminist issues in Russian media spaces.⁴⁷ This development supported a wider public discussion on feminist topics outside specialized media environments and facilitated the formation of feminist identities and networks, enabling also the swift formation of FAR right after the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.⁴⁸ In particular, the ethnic anti-war movements' approach to gender-

based violence builds on the media discourses around domestic violence, feminicides, and sexual harassment that emerged in Russian-language digital media in the second half of the 2010s following various social media campaigns and extensive media coverage of cases of gendered violence.⁴⁹ The ethnic initiatives extend these discourses to local audiences by sharing information and introducing related vocabulary such as "rape culture" or "victim-blaming"⁵⁰, the latter term being popularized in the Russian-language media space through the hashtag campaign #ЭтоНеПоводУбить.⁵¹ Often the initiatives also include individual cases of violence from the regional news or survival stories by victims of domestic violence, thereby bringing individual or personal experiences into the public online space and making them

“DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ARE FRAMED NOT AS SEPARATE FEMINIST CONCERNS BUT AS INTEGRAL TO BROADER ANTI-WAR AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT CRITIQUE.”

a basis for activist mobilization. Such logic, in which the collective action for demanding social and structural changes emerges from the politicization of personal experiences resembles that of feminist online campaigns, hashtag campaigns in particular.⁵² The publications also iterate the transnational character of feminist social media campaigns within the Russian-speaking online community. While the #яНеБоюсьСказать campaign that spread in 2016 from Ukraine to Russia and other post-Soviet countries appeared as more culturally relatable than the #MeToo campaign,⁵³ in 2024 the ethnic and decolonial initiatives engaged actively in a high-profile criminal case from Kazakhstan where the former Minister of the Economy was charged (and finally sentenced) with the femicide of his partner.⁵⁴ This case sparked widespread feminist response and led to a recriminalization of “battery and intentional harm” transferred from the Criminal Code to Administrative Offences in 2017.⁵⁵ In activist publications, the similarity of these problems in both post-Soviet societies is used to underscore the urgency of gender-based violence and to advocate for legal and social change in Russia as well.

THE LANGUAGE AND framing used by ethnic initiatives to address women’s rights and gender-based violence often reflect broader feminist discourses in Russian-language media rather than distinctly regional or decolonial approach. However, when addressing specifically feminism as a movement or feminist grass-roots initiatives, the initiatives foreground local non-Russian actors and movements – the Feminist Anti-War Resistance appearing as the only Russian-wide feminist initiative that the ethnic activists refer to. For example, a publication by the Asians of Russia on the International Day of Feminism highlights the work of “feminist initiatives and projects from national republics” including the transnational project “Feminist translocalities”, the Tuvan feminist media outlet Chavaga, and the Buryatian movement “Ia – Svoboda”.⁵⁶ A joint publication by Asians of Russia and Chavaga media in turn presents women-specific statistics from the republic, combining data on gender-based issues such as high rates of sexual violence and low female representation in local government with more neutral numbers, such as the percentage of women in the regional population or the average number of children delivered by each Tuvan woman.⁵⁷ Thus, while the ways in which the ethnic activists address feminist issues are not radically different from other feminist content in the Russian media during the past decade, their emphasis on local feminist initiatives and contexts challenges the Moscow- and Saint Petersburg-centrism of mainstream Russian feminism.

THE HEGEMONY of Moscow and Saint Petersburg in Russian feminism is criticized more explicitly in the publications of the

Indigenous of Russia Foundation, which connect discussions of the intersections between feminist and decolonial aims with critiques of white feminism and feminist debates on intersectionality.⁵⁸ According to an interview with a feminist film director shared by the foundation, instead of talking about “white feminism”, in the Russian context it would be more suitable to refer to the “Moscow-centric approach to feminism” and “feminists of non-Russian nationalities” whose experience of gender is fused with the experience of Russian colonialism.⁵⁹ This discussion connects to and continues the broader debates on intersectional feminism in the post-Soviet context. As Dinara Yangeldina shows, when initiating the discussion on intersectionality in online platforms, Russophone feminists used various strategies to translate the category of race from the Anglo-American

Black feminist theory to account for ethnic relations and processes of racialization in the post-Soviet space.⁶⁰ Yangeldina’s later work demonstrates that after the full-scale invasion, decolonial discourse has become the primary framework for addressing these inequalities also among feminist activists.⁶¹ At the same time, a collaborative publication *Radical love for ‘Kalmykness’* by Oirad Jisän and Beda media (a decolonial digital media project focused on post-Soviet space) shows that the tradition of black feminism may also appear as a source of inspiration for decolonial activism in Russia’s na-

tional republics. In the publication, the author, Kalmyk activist Nomto Kükün (a pseudonym), draws on Sarah Ahmed and Audre Lorde to formulate a decolonial Kalmyk manifesto. Building on Sarah Ahmed’s article “Feminist Killjoys”, the author argues that despite being accused of angriness, “national and decolonial activists are primarily driven by love” love for one’s people, which becomes the foundation of their activism and resistance to Russian hegemony: “In the anti-Kalmyk world, to want to forget about your Kalmyk identity is to float downstream. To love it is an act of resistance.”⁶²

3. *LGBTQ rights and ethnic activism*

Along with women’s rights, the ethnic initiatives openly express support for LGBTQ rights and unanimously condemn Russia’s repressive legislation targeting sexual and gender minorities, including the ban on gender reassignment in July 2023 and the designation of the “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization. While underlining the importance of LGBTQ rights, the projects also link the oppression of LGBTQ people with the repression of all minorities in Russian society – ethnic groups included – as well as with the wider erosion of civil rights. This framing positions the struggle for LGBTQ rights as inseparable from wider efforts to dismantle repressive structures and defend political freedoms. However, while all

“ALONG WITH WOMEN’S RIGHTS, THE ETHNIC INITIATIVES OPENLY EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR LGBTQ RIGHTS AND UNANIMOUSLY CONDEMN RUSSIA’S REPRESSIVE LEGISLATION TARGETING SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES.”

ethnic initiatives express support for LGBTQ rights, the language and vocabulary in which they address LGBTQ questions vary, illustrating differences in their familiarity with and engagement in these issues. For example, while activists in Komi Daily write about “gender affirmative care”⁶³ addressing Russia’s restrictions on trans-rights, Serditaia Chuvashia refers to the procedure as “sex change” [smena pola]⁶⁴, a notion that can be considered as outdated among trans-rights activists.⁶⁵ A similar example is also noted by Baranova, who points out how one ethnic activist leader had used “stigmatizing language” when approving LGBTQ rights.⁶⁶

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS of oppressive structures becomes especially apparent in publications addressing the intersections of queer and Indigenous identities – a topic explored in particular by Komi Daily and the Indigenous of Russia Foundation. In August 2024, the latter even published a short documentary titled *Intersections* on its YouTube channel to talk about representatives of non-Russian ethnicities with queer identities.⁶⁷ Both organizations emphasize the similar structures of oppression to which both Indigenous and LGBTQ people are subjected in contemporary Russia. They reveal how both identities are suppressed through processes such as forced Russification and restrictions on “LGBTQ propaganda” as well as by the labeling of both ethnic and LGBTQ advocacy groups as “extremists”, resulting in the double marginalization of LGBTQ individuals within ethnic minorities and Indigenous people. Especially the Indigenous of Russia Foundation highlights the intersecting forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQ people from ethnic minorities on the basis of their sexual or gender identity and their non-Russian ethnicity. The documentary *Intersections* as well as the foundation’s related social media publications illustrate experiences of racism within the Russian LGBTQ community on the one hand and the homophobic attitudes within the ethnic communities on the other. In doing so, these materials contribute to and build upon discussions of the notion of intersectionality, which these projects use to articulate the double marginalization of queer individuals within non-Russian ethnicities.

While underlining the similarity between the marginalization of non-Russian and LGBTQ people, the projects reveal in their publications and the above-mentioned documentary film how racist and imperialist attitudes prevail in the LGBTQ community. On the one hand, this exposes LGBTQ representatives of non-Russian ethnicities to racist encounters, as the documentary *Intersections* shows through examples of racist comments that the people in the film receive from Russian LGBTQ individuals. On the other hand, these attitudes also hinder solidarity between the groups despite their shared experience of oppression. The troubles of forming alliances between decolonial and Russian LGBTQ activists are illustrated by the Indigenous of Russia Foundation in a publication explaining why declined to collaborate with a Russian LGBTQ on an event during Pride month in 2024.⁶⁸ As the post reveals, the organization’s proposal to present cultural practices of non-Russian and Indigenous peoples through a “queer” lens reproduced patterns of exoticization, relying

on national costumes and cultural stereotypes. As the activists point out, such representations obscure the real-life challenges and structural discrimination these people face in Russian society.⁶⁹ Thus, although ethnic and decolonial activists demonstrate a strong awareness of intersecting forms of oppression and express solidarity with other groups, their own anti-racist and decolonial claims are not always met with reciprocal understanding within Russian LGBTQ activists.

Baranova connects ethnic activists’ engagement with LGBTQ rights particularly to their emigration to the West, where they have had to voice their positions on these issues.⁷⁰ The influence of the Western context is also evident in how ethnic activists frame LGBTQ questions through a juxtaposition between Russia and the West. For example, a publication by the Free Yakutia Foundation features a statement by a singer and psychologist who argues that the ban on gender-affirming surgery represents a culmination of Russia’s ideological separation from the West. The author contrasts Western development toward the inclusion of minorities in the sphere of human rights with the use of minority oppression as an ideological tool in Russia. This message is reinforced through illustrations contrasting successful openly queer figures from the United States, such as Apple’s CEO Tim Cook, with images of convicted murderers from Russia who avoided sentencing or were released based on military service on the Ukrainian front.⁷¹ Similarly, the Indigenous of Russia Foundation comments the ban on gender assignment treatment by stating how “[t]his law placed Russia once again in the same row with Pakistan, Venezuela, Syria, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and a number of African countries that are practically lacking human rights”.⁷² Through this oppositional framing between the liberal, progressive West and the oppressive Russian state, the decolonial initiatives seek both to distance themselves from Russia and to highlight its repressive policies. However, such rhetoric reproduces the imperialist power asymmetry embedded in the discourse that positions the West as more advanced in comparison to the backward, underdeveloped East/South – including Russia⁷³ – while simultaneously disregarding the rise of conservative movements in the West.⁷⁴

AT THE SAME TIME, while most of the LGBTQ discourse used by the ethnic activists follows the Western frameworks, especially Indigenous of Russia Foundation simultaneously draws on pre-colonial histories and Indigenous cultures beyond Russia to address queer identities, such as third-gender categories, and the effects of colonialism on them.⁷⁵ Similarly, as the Russian government has justified repressive legislation by framing LGBTQ rights as inherently non-Russian and as a Western influence, the foundation opposes this discourse by demonstrating that non-heteronormative practices existed among Indigenous peoples in the Russian territory prior to colonization.⁷⁶ These publications echo María Lugones’ argument that the gender binary and heteronormativity are products of coloniality, suggesting that instead of non-heteronormativity or gender fluidity the so-called “traditional values” – heteronormativity and gender binary – are superimposed constructs introduced by the colonial Russian

and Western empires. This perspective demonstrates that, in addition to feminist concepts and Western LGBTQ discourse, the decolonial activists are constantly seeking alternatives for the Russian/Soviet/Western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has used a reflexive thematic analysis of social media content from seven ethnic anti-war projects and movements to examine how they address gender and sexuality within decolonial and anti-war activism. While all examined initiatives engage with these issues, they vary in the frequency and volume of such content relative to their overall social media output. For example, during the observation period, the Free Yakutia Foundation published 12 and Komi Daily 13 Instagram posts on these topics. However, during one year such as 2024, their total outputs on Instagram were 267 and 40 posts, respectively, making gender and sexuality proportionally a more prominent topic in Komi Daily's content. Despite these differences, across all ethnic initiatives these issues constitute only one among many topics that the activists address in their social media content.

This raises the question of why it is relevant to focus on these themes and what their analysis reveals about ethnic activist initiatives more broadly. Based on the thematic analysis and the observations presented above, it can be shown that questions of gender and sexuality started to emerge in ethnic activism already in 2022, particularly as the initiatives disseminated information about women's anti-war mobilization in the national republics. However, these themes became more visible in 2023 and 2024, and the ways of addressing them gained greater variation and depth, as the initiatives began publishing overviews of gender roles in their respective communities, highlighting gender-specific inequalities, and expressing solidarity with LGBTQ rights. While this development and increasing diversification on the one hand reflect the restrictions introduced in 2023 and 2024 in Russian legislation on women's reproductive and LGBTQ rights, it also indicates a broader expansion of these initiatives' agendas to cover a wider range of societal issues.

More important, however, is what the framing of these questions reveals about the positioning of ethnic initiatives within broader debates on ethnic minorities in Russian society and within the activist field, particularly in relation to feminist and LGBTQ movements. As these themes link to the wider political criticism practiced by the decolonial and ethnic anti-war movements, they are used to illustrate systemic oppression in Russian legislation, especially in the context of the war. In this the ethnic activists' goals align in many respects with those of feminist and LGBTQ movements – with FAR in particular. As Baranova demonstrates, these convergences foster collaboration on digital platforms through mutual amplification, including the reposting

each other's publications and organizing and promoting joint events, thereby increasing each other's visibility among their respective core audiences and increasing attention to shared concerns.⁷⁷


At the same time, the analysis shows that many ethnic and decolonial activists, especially within certain movements, are well informed of or engaged in feminist and LGBTQ issues. Their publications actively seek to integrate these topics into discussion of the colonial histories and present conditions of the national republics. As Baranova notes, "ethnic activists call for the discussion and adjustment of feminist concepts to account for ethnic and regional differences".⁷⁸ This search for an activist positioning and language that would integrate both regional or ethnic-specific and feminist concerns is reflected in the wide range of frameworks, theories, and examples drawn from Indigenous histories and cultures in and beyond Russia that the activists demonstrate in their publication. It also illustrates the activists' wide expertise and close engagement of both local histories and global Indigenous and decolonial activism that they disseminate and make accessible to local audiences in Russia. In this respect, their work parallels to and also partially overlaps with the past and ongoing discussions on conceptualizations for addressing intersectional or ethnic issues in Russophone feminism traced and analyzed by Yangeldina.⁷⁹

HOWEVER, AS MANY activists operate in emigration in Western countries, this context can be seen as reflected in the occasionally even uncritical and black-and-white adoption of not only the concepts from Western feminist and queer movements but also the discourse of Western models of feminism and LGBTQ rights as signs of modernity, progress, and civilization. This can be interpreted both as a strategic distancing from Russia's neo-conservative politics and a response to possible expectations within Western societal and activist environments. In this sense, ethnic initiatives must navigate a position between

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Russia's forced imposition of "traditional values" in the national republics on the one hand and the imperialist hierarchies embedded in Western discourses on the other. This position can be understood as defined by inter-imperial rivalry between Russian and Western discourses.⁸⁰ The activists' precarious position in the West and the potential dependence on Western funding may also constrain their possibilities to critique Western imperialism, risking of being interpreted as agreeing with neoconservative values in Russia. At the same time, the use of specialized and Western terminology may distance domestic audiences, making it thereby harder for them to subscribe to the activists' perspectives and embrace their message. Therefore, it is worth asking if the less active engagement of some movements or the use of less specialized activist vocabulary is a deliberate strategy to avoid alienating potential audiences in Russia.⁸¹

On the other hand, the ethnic initiatives not only introduce feminist and LGBTQ issues and vocabulary to audiences in Russia but also redirect attention to the cultures and traditions of non-Russian peoples, examining the roles of women and non-heteronormative practices and the impact of Russian coloniality on them. This involves a critical challenging of stereotypical and colonial representations of women in non-Russian cultures and questioning the framing of non-heteronormative sexual or gender expression as Western imports. Drawing on global decolonial activism and academic debates, the initiatives highlight diverse forms of gender expression across Indigenous communities worldwide. While this demonstrates the activists' familiarity with decolonial discourse and an effort to make it accessible to local audiences among ethnic minorities and Indigenous people in Russia, it also raises questions about the potential elitism embedded in the decolonial framework, which may remain associated with highly educated circles, particularly within Western academia and cultural fields.⁸²

TO CONCLUDE, the analysis shows that although gender and LGBTQ issues may at times appear marginal, they are integrated into the broader political agenda of decolonial activism, reflecting a shift from war-focused mobilization toward wider social critique. Through these themes, ethnic activists articulate systemic oppression, coloniality, and the impact of Russian state policies on people in national republics. While their framing aligns with the goals of feminist and LGBTQ movements, the activists also actively seek a decolonial rearticulation of gender and sexuality by engaging global decolonial and Indigenous perspectives. At the same time, these themes highlight the activists' constrained position between Russian and Western discursive regimes, shaped by their inter-imperial power relations. They also raise questions about the potential elitism of decolonial discourse and its accessibility to target audiences in Russia. However, given the limited scope of this study and its focus on seven initiatives, it is impossible to draw final conclusions about how decoloniality is framed in relation to other topics addressed by the initiatives. Most importantly, the analysis does not allow for conclusions about how audiences in Russia interpret or respond to activists' messages. Although the growing presence of decolonial content on digital platforms may gradually contribute to its popularization in Russophone media spaces similarly to the rise of feminist discourse in the 2010s⁸³, the ongoing war in Ukraine and the designation of both ethnic anti-war initiatives and the LGBTQ movement as extremist significantly restrict this potential compared to the conditions of the previous decade. 

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Acknowledgement: This research was conducted as part of FEM-CORUS project, funded by the Finnish Research Council, grant no. 341436.

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- 81 Perheentupa et al. point to a corresponding strategy applied by FAR in their samizdat journal *Zhenskaia Pravda* (Perheentupa et al., “‘She is not A(Lone)’”).
- 82 As an example of such criticism, see for example Uyghur artist collective Sultan Kizlar’s manifesto against decoloniality (Sultan Kizlar, “‘Nas toshnit ot dekolonial’nosti’, – manifest dlia aziatskogo iskusstva [Decoloniality makes us sick: a manifesto for Asian art]”, *Syg.ma*, January 19, 2025. Available at: <https://syg.ma/@sultan-kizlar/nas-toshnit-ot-dekolonialnosti--manifest-dlya-aziatskogo-iskusstva>
- 83 Ratilainen et al., *Contesting Feminism*.

“We **comply** but do not **obey**”

Everyday resistance in contemporary Russian schools

by **A. Hope & V. Milidia**

abstract

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, education has become a central arena in Russia for the consolidation of an authoritarian state project. This article examines how history and social studies teachers navigate the intensified ideological control in everyday school practice. Drawing on ten in-depth interviews conducted in late 2024, the study analyses subtle, non-heroic forms of resistance, conceptualized through James C. Scott’s notion of the “weapons of the weak”. The guiding research question is: What forms does resistance take when open confrontation becomes too costly, and how should such practices be interpreted politically? The authors identify two principal scenarios of resistance: a collective one, which they term the “besieged fortress,” and an individual one – “a stranger among one’s own”; suggesting an ambivalent character of quiet resistance in authoritarian contexts — simultaneously protective, adaptive, and potentially erosive of the regime’s normative authority.

KEYWORDS: Everyday resistance, weapon of the weak, informal public sphere, doublethink, authoritarian schooling, Russian schools.

By the early 2020s, the ideological infrastructure of Putinism had consolidated into an increasingly explicit state doctrine in the Russian Federation. Following the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, education became one of the central arenas for the institutionalization of this doctrine.¹ A series of rapid reforms including the nationwide introduction of the extracurricular program “Conversations about What Matters” (2022), the return of basic military training “Fundamentals of Security and Defense of the Homeland” (2024), and the publication of unified state-approved history textbooks (*Medinsky’s textbook*, 2024) – signaled a shift toward a tightly centralized and ideologically saturated educational regime.

These reforms are officially framed as the construction of a “sovereign education system”, designed to cultivate loyalty, patriotism, and readiness to defend the state.² Echoing broader conservative and anti-Western discourses, state officials explicitly reject post-Soviet educational pluralism as a misguided imitation of foreign models. The “Education in Russian Schools 2022–2025” report documents that “sovereignization” has entailed erosion of school-level autonomy, expanded bureaucratic oversight, increased ideological propaganda in curricula and extracurriculars, and repression of disloyal teachers.³ What is happening illustrates Michael Apple’s concept of the authoritarian consolidation of “official knowledge,” whereby the state monopolizes historical narratives, moral values, and defines normative models of civic subjectivity.⁴



Pupils of a secondary school listen to Russia's President Vladimir Putin's address at the first day of the new school year in Moscow on September 1, 2025. This is a genre photo, the people in the image does not have anything to do with the persons mentioned in the article.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER NEMENOV/GETTY IMAGES

While the expansion of ideological control has been well documented, much less is known about how teachers navigate, reinterpret, or quietly resist these demands in their everyday professional practice. After 2022, visible public resistance within Russia declined sharply, particularly in institutional settings such as schools. Yet the absence of open protest does not imply full compliance. Rather, it raises the questions: what forms resistance takes when confrontation becomes too costly – and how such forms could be interpreted politically? This article addresses that question by focusing on the everyday practices of history and social studies teachers in Russian state schools.

Conceptual framework

We examine subtle, everyday forms of resistance in Russian schools drawing on James C. Scott's concept of the *weapons of the weak*.⁵ Using the metaphor of “weapons”, he deliberately rejects the normative expectation that resistance *must* be transformative, public, or collective, thereby imbuing practices typically perceived as apathy or adaptation with political meaning. He emphasizes that subordinates (*weak*) are not merely objects of power who adapt or passively accommodate but are active (contr)agents. Sabotage, feigned compliance, concealment of information, foot-dragging, petty theft, or irony are ways of acting against power, even if not through open confrontation. The “weapons of the weak” rarely determine the outcome of a “war”, but they allow survival, wear down the adversary, undermine authority, and reduce its effective-

ness. The “weapon” metaphor captures not a promise of emancipation, but the practice of struggle in conditions where victory looks impossible, yet complete submission is equally unacceptable.

According to Scott, everyday resistance operates through the switching between *public transcripts*: what the dominated display before power (loyalty, obedience); and *hidden transcripts*: what they say and do among their own, expressing resistance, mockery, or contempt.⁶ Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov in their analysis of late Soviet society, conceptualize the skill of switching between these registers as *doublethink* and *double morality*. They conceptualize it as a structurally produced division between officially prescribed normative commitments and the practical moral orientations governing everyday action. Individuals publicly perform loyalty to official ideological norms while privately adhering to alternative moral criteria rooted in professional ethics, interpersonal trust, and situational responsibility.⁷

A POSSIBLE KEY conceptual distinction between “doublethink” or “double morality” and the “weapons of the weak” lies in how these practices are interpreted. The authors of the former concepts tend to see them less as forms of covert protest—as “weapons” of resistance—and more as instruments of survival that enable actors to avoid direct confrontation. Rather than functioning as tools that subtly undermine the authoritarian order, they operate as adaptive maneuvers that prevent open protest from

emerging and thereby prolong the existence of an uncomfortable yet familiar and habituated system.

In this article, we attend closely to the ambivalence of resistance practices in an authoritarian context. Rather than presuming that everyday acts of evasion, buffering, or withdrawal are inherently emancipatory, we analyze how they simultaneously constrain and reproduce power. By foregrounding this tension, we seek to move beyond binary categorizations of compliance versus (open) resistance and to examine how survival strategies, ethical restraint, and political dissent intertwine in ways that are at once protective, potentially system-sustaining, and capable of subtly eroding the regime from within by limiting the depth of ideological internalization and quietly hollowing out its normative authority.

From this perspective, the mode of action articulated by one of our interviewees and used in the title of this article can be interpreted: “we comply” (*podchinyaemsya*) refers to the production of a correct *public transcript*, while “but do not obey” (*ne povinuemsya*) denotes the preservation of an autonomous *hidden transcript* in which the state’s demands are neutralized, ironized, or simply disregarded at the level of substance. In this article, we aim to show how transcript switching works in different contexts; how teachers explain to themselves and their students the need for “doublethink”.

At the beginning of the analysis of empirical data, we identify two configurations that generate qualitatively different forms of everyday resistance and expose teachers to unequal levels of risk: whether resistance is organized *collectively*, within a cohesive school community, or *individually*, by a teacher occupying the position of a “lone dissenter” within the school.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES become possible in schools where an *informal public sphere*⁸ oriented toward resistance has developed, enabling shared meanings, evaluations, and courses of action to be articulated, coordinated, and stabilized as a hidden transcript in Scott’s term. In such contexts, resistance takes the form of maintaining and defending organizational boundaries that separate internal pedagogical practices from external bureaucratic and ideological control. Everyday resistance here is collective, routine, and embedded in organizational arrangements that protect teachers from direct exposure in an increasingly toxic environment. As one of our interviewees from elite school noted:

We live as if in a besieged fortress. (interviewee 2)

By contrast, individual strategies emerge in cases when the opposition-minded teacher is isolated within the school. Here, resistance is shaped not by shared norms or institutional buffering but by individual bargaining power, labor-market oppor-

tunities, and the structural fragility of the organization. These practices often gravitate toward exit-based strategies, following Albert Hirschman’s classic exit / voice / loyalty framework.⁹ These strategies denote a form of resistance in which pressure on an organization or authority is exerted through the possibility of withdrawal (exit), whether real or anticipated.¹⁰

Taken together, these contrasting configurations provide an analytical lens for examining the specific practices of quiet resistance discussed in the following sections: “the besieged fortress” (collective strategies) and “a stranger among one’s own” (individual strategies).

Methods and material

This study is based on ten in-depth interviews conducted in October–November 2024 with history and social studies [obschestvoznaniye] teachers in state secondary schools in Russian large cities and smaller towns. We used biographical interviews that focused on experiences at the school and reflections on changes in recent years.

The Russian state school has long been a closed institution for independent researchers, and intensified administrative control over the past decade has further restricted access. Many potential participants declined interviews, especially recorded ones, highlighting diffuse fears and uncertainty. As social science teacher from elite school explained:

We’ve all been frozen now [...] we prefer not to speak if we can avoid speaking; not to ask if we can avoid asking; not to express an opinion if we can avoid expressing it. (interviewee 1)

The covert nature of everyday resistance makes its scale difficult to assess. Our goal is therefore not to measure prevalence, but to identify and describe concrete practices of resistance at both the collective (particular school) and individual levels. Given the risks involved, all informants and institutions are anonymized.

Initially, the study aimed to capture a wide range of responses to educational reforms, from loyalist adaptation and apolitical disengagement to conscious active resistance. However, only critically minded teachers ultimately agreed to participate, often explicitly framing their evasion of official directives as a conscious ethical and political choice rather than indifference. For them, everyday resistance was tied to personal and professional dignity, an emancipatory understanding of pedagogy, and a commitment to school autonomy and democratic practices.

The repertoire of resistance practices depends largely on the structural conditions in which teachers find themselves. Below, we will consider examples of collectively organized and individual resistance.



“Conversations about What Matters” (Russian: *Razgovory o vazhnom*), is a name for a series of compulsory school lessons in Russia introduced in 2022 that covers various topics from the Russian government’s perspective, such as national identity, public holidays, and world events. Important Conversations lessons take place every Monday morning during the school year, following the flag-raising ceremony.



As part of the “Conversations about What Matters” classes, the Ministry of Emergency Situations employees spoke about the work of firefighters.

PHOTO: MINISTRY OF EMERGENCY SITUATIONS OF RUSSIA

School as “the besieged fortress”

The empirical basis for reconstructing collective strategy of resistance comes from interviews with six interviewees working in elite schools in large Russian cities, with particular attention to four teachers (two of them also hold positions in school administration) employed at the same school. Through long-standing hiring practices prioritizing both professional competence and compatibility with a democratic ethos, this school has developed a cohesive teaching staff sharing broadly similar critical and humanistic orientations. Interviewees describe a collective willingness to defend institutional autonomy against incorporation into the state’s administrative and ideological vertical. As one interviewee put it:

We do what we deem necessary, but nothing ever leaks out; [...] we carefully hide the fact that we exist.

(interviewee 1)

This formulation captures a core mechanism of collective quiet resistance: the deliberate construction of a strong boundary between the intra-school space and the external world. We describe *Bureaucratic shielding* and *Moral and communicative buffering* as examples of this collective strategy of resistance.

Bureaucratic shielding

Teachers consistently report that contemporary schools are subjected to an intensifying bureaucratic burden, driven primarily by frequently changing mandates and reporting requirements imposed by educational authorities. Importantly, this pressure is not necessarily articulated through direct ideological prescriptions. Rather, it operates through the relentless expansion of paperwork and procedural obligations, which increasingly structure teachers’ everyday labor. Reporting on various patri-

otic events, for instance, does not so much impose substantive ideological control as it adds yet another layer to what teachers describe as an already colossal volume of “senseless” bureaucratic work.

This dynamic is vividly illustrated by one interviewee’s account:

They send down programs from above, different every year. Sometimes they change them several times within a single year. All the teachers, like lunatics, [should] sit and rewrite their so-called KTPs – curriculum plans – accordingly. [...] So, you finish writing, and suddenly at the end of August a new model program arrives. [...] The same content, only the topics are reordered, the wording has changed, and some other things too. [...] Redone. In October, the next version arrives—they’ve invented something else. Redone again. A real slog. And then, like a nightmare, you have to forget it all. And when you fill in the journal, you have to copy everything exactly from the KTPs [even though] it bears no relation to reality.

(interviewee 6)

This statement allows us to reconstruct a core mechanism of authoritarian governance in education: control is exercised not through substantive oversight of teaching practices, but through *procedural formalism*. Curricula, lesson plans, and electronic registers function as performative artifacts of subordination. They must be rewritten, updated, and reproduced exactly as prescribed, even when teachers openly acknowledge that they “bear no relation to reality”.

By forcing teachers to devote significant time and cognitive resources to meaningless labor, the system disciplines them through exhaustion, while simultaneously limiting their capacity to critical reflection, effectively preparing for lessons and paying more attention to pedagogical and substantive issues. At

the same time, the emphasis on formal indicators rather than substantive content creates structural conditions under which collective forms of *bureaucratic shielding* become possible, sustainable, and even efficient.

Collective resistance to bureaucratic pressure is institutionalized through the *intra-school redistribution of bureaucratic labor*. Compliance with documentation rituals is delegated to specialized administrative actors who monitor changing requirements and translate them into the appropriate reports. Teachers are involved only if necessary. As one interviewee explained:

We have a person who is responsible for documents, [...] He comes in and says: so, the program needs to be updated. [Formally] we do everything, we don't complain [...] It is impossible to verify. Outwardly – on paper – everything matches. [...] We buy [state approved] textbooks, but they sit in the basement; we don't use them. I have a syllabus drawn up according to this textbook. [...] I prepare detailed lesson plans – with page numbers, paragraphs, and homework assignments – and all these documents are kept in the designated folder so that, if an inspection comes, they can look and see that everything is fully orthodox. (interviewee 1)

Bureaucratic mimicry is thus collectivized and routinized: a fully loyalist public transcript is centrally constructed, enabling the emergence of a relatively autonomous hidden transcript at the level of classroom interaction. As one of history teachers noted, this arrangement effectively insulates classroom practice from external interference:

[...] I am quite free in how I teach. [...] I changed a lot in the curriculum to suit myself, and there is absolutely no control in that regard. [...] Well, only the formal reporting [...] In reality, freedom is quite significant. But one has to assume that many insane requirements simply never reach teachers. The administration somehow resolves things at its own level [...]. (interviewee 4)

Through this *delegation of ritualized subordination*, school administrations act as *institutional buffers*. By producing the required documents, they protect teachers from direct bureaucratic intrusion and minimize the likelihood that ideological enforcement will penetrate everyday pedagogical practice.

Crucially, this arrangement is stabilized by the orientations and constraints of mid-level educational bureaucrats themselves. As one of the teachers and a member of school administration explained:

[...] The district education authorities – the education administration – basically have plenty on their plate. They simply don't have the resources to go to schools. There are no true ideologues there [maybe just a few of them]. No one displays that hyper-fixation or the Soviet-style zeal of the early years of Soviet power – the idea that everyone must be remade, re-forged, and start thinking and feeling differently. What are they responsible for? Indicators: checkmarks, ticks, numbers, percentages. And what do they demand from us? Checkmarks, ticks, numbers, percentages. We provide these [formal indicators] perfectly well. They are not interested in the price at which they are obtained. The worst-case scenario is when some other bodies actually show up – the prosecutor's office, or something like that [...]. (interviewee 1)

This account points to the absence of ideological zeal among inspectors and administrators at the intermediate level. Rather than functioning as committed agents of political re-education, they operate as bureaucratic functionaries embedded in an

accountability regime defined by numerical targets and formal documentation. Their limited resources, combined with weak ideological investment, reduce both the capacity and the motivation to look behind the façade of compliance. Inspection thus becomes a mutually convenient ritual: schools supply the expected indicators, and officials accept them at face value.

At the same time, the reference to the prosecutor's office marks the

boundary of this fragile equilibrium. *Bureaucratic shielding* is effective as long as control remains administrative and internal to the education system. When oversight shifts toward coercive intervention by law enforcement agencies, this protective buffer may collapse (the “worst-case scenario”).

Bureaucratic shielding is not merely a form of individual evasion but a collectively sustained accommodation between schools and the state. Quiet resistance persists not because the state is absent, but because its presence is mediated through formalism, delegation, and indifference to substance – conditions that schools actively exploit to preserve a limited zone of professional and moral autonomy.

Empirical examples illustrate how bureaucratic shielding operates in practice.

[...] schools are allocated funds for the purchase of textbooks. [...] The sums are large, but they are strictly targeted. We [...] are obliged to spend them exclusively on the purchase of textbooks from the approved official list. Which is what we do. At the same time, according to the Law on Education, schools have the right to use

“AS FOR HISTORY, THE MAIN TEXTBOOK IS THE MEDINSKY TEXTBOOK THAT WE BUY, BUT IT SITS IN THE BASEMENT, AND OTHER BOOKS ARE USED IN LESSONS.”

(interviewee 2)

so-called teaching aids, which are not classified as textbooks [and are not so strictly regulated]. And we can completely legally include such a book in our official curriculum [...] As for history, the main textbook is the Medinsky textbook that we buy, but it sits in the basement, and other books are used in lessons – books that have the status of teaching aids. That’s how it works, basically. (interviewee 2)

This is a typical case of what Scott would describe as *false compliance*. At first glance, the school appears fully subordinate to state directives: it receives targeted funding, purchases state-approved textbooks, and formally integrates them into the official educational infrastructure. Publicly, loyalty is unquestioned. In practice, however, this subordination is thoroughly undermined.

The key step lies in exploiting the legal and bureaucratic distinctions inherent in the system—particularly between textbooks and teaching aids. By strictly adhering to the letter of the law while undermining its ideological thrust, school representatives transform state-imposed regulation into a resource for autonomy. Medinsky’s textbook becomes a symbolic artifact of subordination, not a pedagogical tool: it exists, is purchased, can be shown to inspectors, but is pedagogically inert (“it’s in the basement”). Actual learning is relegated to an informal public zone, sanctioned by law but less tightly controlled.

Bureaucratic shielding exemplifies how quiet resistance in schools is institutionally mediated, ambivalent, and ethically calibrated. Through routinized mimicry, administrative delegation, and strategic exploitation of structural loopholes, teachers collectively preserve a zone of professional and moral autonomy.

Moral and communicative buffering

A crucial feature of the context in which collective strategy takes shape is trust among “one’s own”—those with whom politically sensitive issues can be discussed relatively openly, and with whom a shared, meaningful silence can be sustained. Awareness of the (im)possibility of speaking directly, or even communicating through hints and glances, functions as a key marker of the boundary between “insiders” and “outsiders”. As one of our interviewees described it:

‘[our people] understand everything without words’ whereas ‘I don’t talk to strangers about my views and don’t see the point’, ‘in their [outsiders] presence we don’t have such [risky] conversation’. (interviewee 1)

This trust operates as the basis for an informal infrastructure of resistance: it delineates a safe communicative space and enables coordination without explicit articulation. Within this circle, political meanings are conveyed implicitly – through tone, irony, habitual jokes, allusions, or deliberate silences – rather than through direct statements.

The collective strategy presupposes that these relations of trust link not only adults with one another, but also teachers and

high school students (10th- and 11th-grades). As one of our interviewees explains:

They [the students] understand everything right away. [Among the teachers] there are one or two outsiders, and the kids immediately see who they are, because even the manner of speaking is different. Just different – because there’s a different value system in their heads. There are people who are entirely in their own [subject], some in mathematics, [...] and not about this at all. And then there are the others, who from time to time make a joke here, a joke there – and everything becomes clear immediately. (interviewee 1)

This fragment shows that collective silent resistance is sustained not only through *bureaucratic shielding*, but also through a finely calibrated moral and communicative order within the school. Both teachers and students share the ability to “read” political positions through indirect cues – style of speech, irony, humor, or conversational habits – rather than explicit declarations. In Scott’s terms, such interaction belongs to the realm of *infrapolitics*: political meanings circulate below the threshold of overt articulation, embedded in everyday practices and intelligible only to those who share a common moral and interpretive framework.

AT THE SAME TIME, schools are organized around asymmetrical moral responsibilities to children. Teachers’ choices are constrained by pedagogical ethics, care obligations, and complex relationships with students, parents, and administrators. Resistance must therefore be carefully calibrated to avoid exposing children to harm or overt political conflict, producing practices that are indirect, pedagogically mediated, and often ambivalent.

There was a discussion about the politicization of children. And at that moment NN said something like: ‘Dear colleagues, we all understand everything, we all share the same views. But please, let us not politicize children, because we are intelligent, we are adults, we are restrained, whereas children are eager to go out into the streets – and that is simply dangerous’. (interviewee 1)

This episode illustrates how depoliticization operates not through ideological conformity, but through a language of responsibility and care. Political engagement is presented as dangerous not in the abstract, but specifically for children, who are constructed as impulsive, affectively driven, and therefore vulnerable. From this perspective, restraint functions as a moral virtue rather than as capitulation. The refusal to politicize students becomes an ethical judgment grounded in an awareness of unequal exposure to risk and unequal capacity to bear the consequences of political action. Silence here is not simply imposed; it is actively chosen as a way to prevent harm to those deemed more vulnerable.

One of our interviewees describes a critical rupture in the everyday mode of silent resistance, when routine practices of

bureaucratic protection and coded communication prove insufficient. The outbreak of war in February 2022 produces an affective emergency: students experience fear, confusion, and an acute demand for meaning, while the official school environment responds with silence, tension, and visible distress. The 11th-grade students approached their teacher with the request, “Could you arrange for someone to talk to us?” – and asked for advice: “Could we go out to Nevsky Prospekt with an [anti-war] poster?” (interviewee 1). The school administration organized a meeting with the 10th- and 11th-grades students and talked to them:

We talked about what we were feeling and what we were thinking. [...] They saw that we are living people, [...] we can talk to them, and they can rely on us in that sense. We talked to them about the risks they would face if they expressed their position publicly. We explained to them that the machine would grind them down without mercy. And we said that yes, of course, this would also affect the school – but overall, that is not the worst thing. And we asked them to be cautious not because of the school, but because they themselves would be crushed. We are absolutely convinced of this. We told them that we consider our state to be a cannibalistic one. We said this openly [...].

(interviewee 1)

From a Scott-inspired perspective, this moment represents a temporary and carefully controlled movement of the hidden transcript into a semi-public (or informal public) space. Prior to this rupture, critical orientations toward the state were maintained through indirect means – irony, abstraction, jokes, and the disciplined separation between formal compliance and substantive interpretation. The extremity of the situation, however, legitimates a limited suspension of this regime. The conversation with senior students is not an act of mobilization, nor does it amount to overt political dissent; rather, it constitutes a calibrated disclosure, triggered by the students’ explicit request for recognition, explanation, and adult presence.

ALTHOUGH STUDENTS had long been able to “read” the teachers’ critical orientation through irony and coded communication, the affective rupture caused by the war rendered this implicit regime insufficient. Hints and abstraction could sustain a shared understanding under routine conditions, but they could not provide normative clarity or practical guidance in a moment when students contemplated public protest and faced real risk. The request for disclosure thus signals a demand for explicit moral anchoring and adult responsibility. The ensuing conversation constitutes a carefully delimited suspension of the hidden

transcript – less an act of mobilization than an act of pedagogical care under conditions of crisis.

Crucially, the educators’ intervention is structured around a double pedagogical gesture. On the one hand, teachers and administrators articulate an unambiguous moral judgment of the state, explicitly naming the violence of the regime and rejecting the fiction of ideological consensus. In doing so, they recognize students as ethical subjects capable of moral reasoning and political understanding. On the other hand, this moral clarity is immediately paired with a sober assessment of risk. Students are warned against public political expression, not in the language of obedience, but through a stark depiction of repression as an impersonal, grinding “machine” that destroys individuals regardless of intention or sincerity.

Students, according to our interviewees, are not passive recipients. They demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of where political boundaries lie and actively adjust their modes of questioning accordingly:

**“BACK IN 2014
– 2015 – 2016,
UNCOMFORTABLE
QUESTIONS CAME UP
VERY OFTEN [LIKE]
‘STATE YOUR OPINION’
AND SO ON. WHEN
THINGS STARTED
TIGHTENING, ALL OF
THIS FADED VERY
QUICKLY.”**
(interviewee 1)

Back in 2014–2015–2016, uncomfortable questions came up very often [like] ‘state your opinion’ and so on. When things started tightening, all of this faded very quickly. Not because they’re personally afraid of something, but because they understand that it’s better not to do this. You shouldn’t set anyone up – neither others nor yourself. [...] They don’t ask questions like: ‘NN, what do you think about P...?’ – that is, of a personal political nature. They might ask something like: ‘NN, what do you think about the concept of a hybrid regime? We know democracy, we know autocracy, and there’s also a hybrid regime.’ That kind

of question is fine. But they don’t ask what you think about Putin.

(interviewee 1)

The key phrase: “[don’t] set anyone up, neither others nor yourself” – signals that silence here functions as an ethical decision under conditions of asymmetric power and distributed danger. The actors do not necessarily refrain from speaking because they personally fear punishment; instead, they recognize that speech may expose colleagues, students, or school community to harm. In this sense, the refusal to speak becomes a form of preventive care: a way of minimizing potential damage within fragile relational networks.

WITHIN A LIBERAL framework of citizenship, the refusal to “express one’s opinion” is often interpreted as self-censorship or a loss of autonomy. However, in the tradition of the ethics of care, associated with thinkers such as Nel Noddings, moral action is not defined primarily as the assertion of an individual position at any



The publication of unified state-approved history textbooks signaled a shift toward a tightly centralized and ideologically saturated educational regime. President Vladimir Putin during a meeting with editors of history textbooks. PHOTO: MIKHAIL METZEL/TASS

cost. Rather, it involves attentiveness to vulnerability, contextual judgment, and responsiveness to the needs and risks of others.¹¹

From the standpoint of care ethics, the subject is not imagined as an isolated bearer of opinion, but as a relational agent embedded in webs of interdependence. Speech is not treated as an abstract right detached from consequences; it is understood as an act that can trigger institutional repercussions affecting others. Choosing selective silence, indirect questions and remote topics that touch on significant political issues, then, can be read as an exercise of responsibility and contextual practical judgment, rather than as passive submission.

Direct, personalized political questions can be avoided, while abstract and conceptual inquiries, framed in the language of political theory, are treated as legitimate and safe. This distinction signals the acquisition of a practical competence in navigating authoritarian speech regimes: students learn not whether politics can be discussed, but how it can be discussed without generating institutional risk. Silence, irony, and abstraction function as ethical gestures, signaling concern for others' safety while preserving the possibility of critical thought.

A particularly vivid illustration of this moral and communicative buffering is the deliberate teaching of *doublethink* during preparation for state-mandated examinations. One interviewee describes this practice explicitly and without euphemism:

We do this consciously. We explain very clearly to students that there is a certain [critical and reflective] understanding of the processes [...]. At the same time, you need to earn grades in order to move on to further education. We write it exactly like this here – don't ask me why it has to be written this way. Because there are [powerful] people who want to see it. Because this is the course of the party and the government. We write it, forget about it – and that's it. We do this intentionally. I do this completely consciously.

(interviewee 1)

The articulated practice functions as a direct exercise in *doublethink*. Students learn to draw a clear distinction between what must be written in an exam and what can be meaningfully understood, discussed, or believed. Compliance with external evaluative requirements is decoupled from internal conviction: students are taught how to reproduce ideologically loaded formulations without internalizing them or accepting their normative premises. The teacher's role extends beyond the transmission of subject knowledge to mediation between coercive institutional demands and the cultivation of student agency. The school becomes a site where students are implicitly trained to distinguish between genuine analytical engagement and the speech forms required in public or official contexts.

At the same time, this practice underscores the ambivalence inherent in moral and communicative buffering. Teaching students "how to write the right answers and then forget them" simultaneously protects them from institutional sanctions and habituates them to a political environment in which truth and public articulation are structurally misaligned. What operates as care, solidarity, and ethical guidance in the short term may, in the long run, normalize a pattern of ritualized ideological compliance and strategic silence. By learning to separate conviction from performance, students become adept at navigating power without confronting it. While this strategy minimizes immediate harm, it risks stabilizing the very structures it seeks to mitigate, as the refusal of a public voice becomes routinized and the transformative potential of dissent remains suspended.

"A stranger among one's own": Exit-based resistance as an individual strategy

We acknowledge that a collective strategy of resistance is only available to a small number of opposition-minded teachers working in Russian public schools. Most are forced to confront the situation as a minority or even alone within the school community,

deprived of support and protection. In this situation, resistance still exists, but other strategies are chosen.

The empirical basis for individual configuration consists of interviews with four respondents: two working in mainstream public schools in large cities and two in schools in small towns. We describe different forms of exit-based resistance as individual strategies.

ONE KEY PROTECTIVE factor for teachers in the contemporary authoritarianized school environment is the growing labor shortage, which generates leverage for passive or indirect forms of resistance. Under such conditions, educators can refuse assignments or directives without fear of immediate sanction, as replacement personnel are scarce. One teacher recalled:

[...] when the ‘special military operation’ began, we were sent a set of guidelines [...] basically instructing us to conduct a thematic lesson on relations between Ukraine and Russia. The guidelines were for grades 7–8 and 10–11. The deputy principal came up to me and said: here, you need to do it. I refused. [...] I understood [...] that [given the acute teacher shortage in the region] I could refuse. That was the position I was in: I could say ‘no,’ and there would be no sanctions, because they simply would not find another teacher [to replace me]. (interviewee 6)

This account illustrates a form of resistance grounded not in public dissent but in the structural vulnerability of the system itself—namely, chronic teacher shortages that redistribute power in everyday institutional interactions. The refusal to conduct a centrally mandated “thematic lesson” is not framed as protest; it takes the form of a quiet, matter-of-fact “no,” made possible by the practical absence of enforceable sanctions.

In Albert O. Hirschman’s terms, this is a clear example of *exit-based resistance*. The teacher does not employ *voice*: she does not argue with the administration, invoke professional ethics publicly, or attempt collective mobilization. Instead, she relies on the latent potential of exit—not necessarily a physical departure, but a credible possibility that shapes institutional behavior. Under conditions of acute labor shortages, the possibility of exit becomes an *unspoken form of leverage*: administrators recognize that strict enforcement could result in losing a teacher they cannot easily replace.

Crucially, this form of exit is structural rather than heroic. Its effectiveness depends on shared awareness of staffing shortages and on an asymmetry of costs: the institution stands to lose more from enforcement than the individual does from refusal.

At the same time, the protective capacity of this strategy is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it preserves professional and moral autonomy, shielding teachers from direct repression. On the other hand, it does not translate into collective voice or challenge the mechanisms of ideological governance; it produces individualized exceptions that the system can tolerate, leaving broader authoritarian structures intact.

A subtler, exit-adjacent strategy involves *curricular avoidance* or selective non-compliance within the classroom. History teachers, in particular, face the challenge of teaching official post-Soviet narratives alongside propagandistic interpretations of recent events, especially the “special military operation.” In schools where colleagues and parents are largely loyalist or indifferent, opposition-minded teachers often sidestep ideologically toxic topics, invoking workload, time constraints, or exam priorities as justification:

I don’t have time... Well, we’ll go as far as we go. [...] Beyond Perestroika, I’m not going anywhere, of course. About the 1990s, perhaps something could be added, but I try not to touch it anymore... (interviewee 7)

“I HAVE THE FEELING THAT EVERYONE AT SCHOOL KNOWS ABOUT MY POLITICAL POSITION. AND MY IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR WHO IS A HARDCORE PUTIN SUPPORTER AND AN ARDENT SUPPORTER OF THE WAR ALSO.” (interviewee 6)

Teachers do not openly challenge the official narrative; instead, they circumvent it tactically, ending lessons in 1991 or delegating sensitive topics to unmonitored self-study. In Scott’s terms, this preserves a distinction between public and hidden transcripts: formally, the curriculum remains intact; substantively, ideological content is neutralized.

[...] it’s very naïve to include paragraphs about the ‘special military operation’ in textbooks – no one is ever going to get to them. [...] It’s the 11th grade; they simply don’t care anymore – they’re preparing for the Unified State Exam (EGE). And for those who take history, the EGE checks this with just a single paragraph – learn this one thing, and that’s it. (interviewee 6)

As a result, ideologically charged material about the last 20 years of Russian history becomes functionally irrelevant: it exists on paper, but not in pedagogical reality. This illustrates a broader pattern of bureaucratic ritualism. State demands are met at the level of documentation and formal compliance – the topic appears in the textbook; the exam includes minimal mention of it—while substantive interaction is quietly emptied. This also reveals the limitations of authoritarian control over the educational process. By relying on formal inclusion rather than mandatory pedagogical practices, the system creates opportunities for hidden avoidance. Viewed through Hirschman’s lens, this

represents a form of *internal exit*: teachers remain physically present and formally loyal but selectively withdraw effort from politically charged content.

Exit can also take a longer-term, career-oriented form. One teacher reflected:

After 2022, things became difficult. At first, I thought it would all end quickly. By 2023, when new subjects were being introduced and ideological initiatives were actively promoted – networks were being created, and money was being directed there – I realized I needed to act. I decided to retrain as a mathematics teacher.

(interviewee 7)

In this case, exit becomes *professional repositioning*. Rather than confronting the system, the teacher relocates within the educational labor market to reduce exposure to politically charged assignments. As in other exit-based strategies, the move protects individual autonomy without producing public dissent. Yet its systemic effect is again ambivalent: it removes potentially critical actors from ideologically sensitive positions, thereby allowing the system to function more smoothly.

One of our interviewees, whose responsibilities as a homeroom teacher include conducting the extracurricular sessions “Conversations about What Matters” (Monday, 9:00 a.m.) and “Russia – My Horizons” (Thursday, 9:00 a.m.), does not conduct them because of ideological reasons. Instead, she allows her 11th-grade students to come to school an hour later on those days.

When asked by the interviewer how this is possible, she refers to the support of parents who are “strongly oriented toward an academic/scientific track” and who believe:

Why should my child come at nine in the morning for something unclear, when that child can sleep an extra hour, arrive at ten, be more productive, perform better, win all the Olympiads², and get into university?

(interviewee 6)

At the same time, she admits that she herself “doesn’t understand how it works that they don’t pressure me or force me to conduct these lessons”:

[...] I have the feeling that everyone at school knows about my political position. And my immediate supervisor who is a hardcore Putin supporter and an ardent supporter of the war also. [But for now, all is quiet.]

(interviewee 6)

Here, curricular refusal operates as an *internal exit*. But, unlike earlier examples, this strategy is reinforced by *relational shielding*. The teacher builds a coalition of protection: parents provide pragmatic justification (“productivity,” university admission), students participate in maintaining silence, administration appears to tolerate or strategically ignore the deviation. Instead of fabricating paperwork, she mobilizes performance-oriented

parental logic as a depoliticizing cover. Ideological refusal is reframed as educational optimization. This is a subtle transformation of the public transcript: the ideological lesson disappears not as dissent, but as inefficiency.

The most analytically striking dimension, however, is her open political discussion with students:

With my class, especially the 11th grade, [...] there’s a certain atmosphere – we calmly talk about everything [...]. And, well, yes, I still haven’t been fired.

Interviewer: So no one reports on you?

Well, somehow, we’ve made a kind of pact with the class: I do everything possible to ensure your comfortable existence in this school. You, in turn, do everything possible so that I can continue working here until you graduate.

(interviewee 6)

In Scott’s terms, in this case the classroom becomes a protected site where the hidden transcript is temporarily spoken aloud. Outside, neutrality or formal loyalty is maintained; inside, critical voice emerges. Yet this is not public protest. It is localized voice, confined within a trusted micro-community. The “pact” with students is crucial. It institutionalizes mutual silence: she provides care and protection; they provide discretion. This is a classic Scottian mechanism: hidden transcripts require collective guardianship. The students’ silence is not passivity but active participation in maintaining a protected counter-public.

This case exemplifies the deep ambivalence of authoritarian resistance. It creates a genuine micro-sphere of autonomy, suspends ideological rituals, and fosters critical discussion. Yet it rests on silence and trust rather than institutional guarantees. The supervisor is described as a “hardcore Putin supporter,” yet enforcement does not occur. This suggests a form of pragmatic authoritarian governance, where ideological enforcement is uneven and selective. The regime tolerates localized deviations as long as they remain contained. Thus, like many forms of quiet resistance, this strategy simultaneously protects individuals and stabilizes the broader system.

Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical material shows that opposition-minded teachers are remarkably inventive in their efforts to navigate, with minimal damage, between the risk of state repression for dissent and the threat of moral distress resulting from betraying their own convictions.

The everyday resistance practices documented in this study – Bureaucratic shielding, Moral and communicative buffering, Exit-based resistance – may appear modest and politically inconclusive. Yet under conditions of intensified ideological control, such practices acquire significance precisely because they operate below the threshold of repression.

Our findings suggest that everyday resistance in Russian schools functions neither as a prelude to open opposition nor as mere adaptation. Instead, it occupies a liminal space in which authoritarian power is simultaneously undermined and stabi-

lized. In elite schools, collective doublethink can temporarily shield institutional autonomy through trust, coordination, and administrative buffering. In ordinary schools, individual teachers exploit systemic vulnerabilities—staff shortages, administrative overload, parental pragmatism—to carve out fragile zones of autonomy. In both cases, resistance remains intentionally non-public, carefully calibrated to avoid escalation.

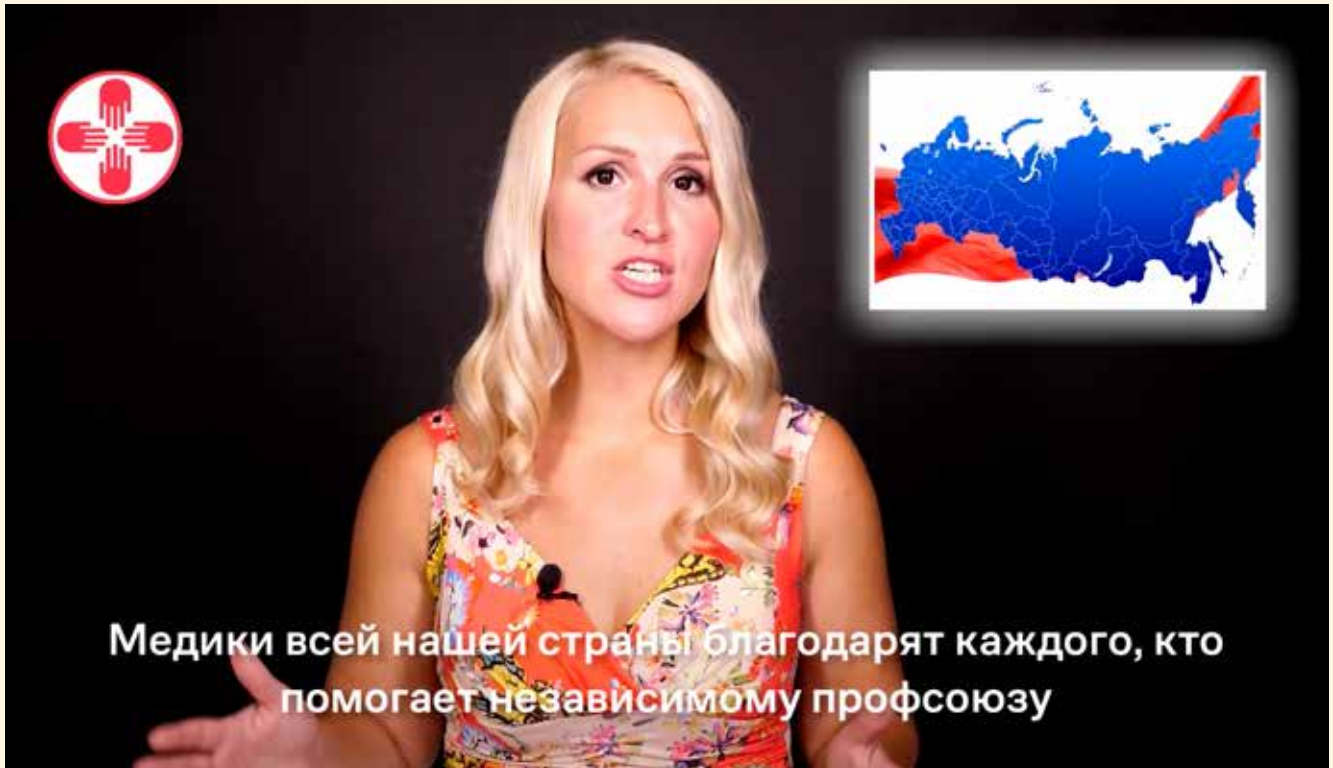
As Michael Apple reminds us, micropolitical resistance within schools often remains defensive and fragmented, protecting local spaces of autonomy while leaving the broader structure of ideological domination intact. From a Freirean perspective, the pedagogy that emerges under authoritarian constraint preserves critical awareness but curtails collective agency.¹³ Post-Soviet critiques of doublethink and double morality sharpen this ambivalence. Practices that shield teachers and students from repression may also socialize young people into a deeply instrumental and cynical relationship with politics. Learning to “write what they [system representatives] want and forget it”, to separate truth from performance, and to treat public discourse as a hollow ritual risks reproducing what Alexey Yurchak described as hypernormalized power.¹⁴

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE of these practices lies not in their transformative capacity, but in their persistence. They prevent the full internalization of state ideology and slow the work of indoctrination, even as they defer the possibility of collective articulation. Whether such practices will eventually erode authoritarian control or continue to sustain it by displacing open conflict remains an open question—one that can only be answered by tracing how hidden transcripts might, under changing conditions, become public ones. ✕

A. Hope and **V. Milidia** are both independent researchers writing under pseudonyms.

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- 8 Following Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, the informal public sphere refers to a space of communication, meaning-making, moral evaluations, and practical coordination located between the private and the officially public, where shared evaluations of social and political reality are produced outside sanctioned institutional discourse. This sphere plays a key role in authoritarian contexts by enabling coordination, moral judgment, and limited collective agency without open confrontation with power. (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov, *The Informal public...*)
- 9 In this framework, “voice” refers to the public expression of dissatisfaction and demands for change; “exit” to refusal of participation (leaving an organization, changing jobs, or disengaging from cooperation) whether real or anticipated; and “loyalty” to the factor that restrains both exit and voice. In authoritarian and repressive contexts, withdrawal, or the credible threat of withdrawal, begins to perform the function that public criticism (“voice”) would play under less restrictive conditions. (Albert O. Hirschman. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
- 10 Exit becomes resistance—rather than merely an individual survival strategy – when withdrawal imposes tangible costs on the system (such as staff shortages or organizational disruption), when authorities recognize the possibility of exit and incorporate it into managerial calculations, and when exit is deployed selectively and strategically rather than as a mass departure. (Hirschman. *Exit, Voice...*)
- 11 In Nel Noddings’s framework, pedagogical responsibility is asymmetrical: the teacher bears a heightened moral obligation toward the student. This asymmetry creates a situation in which any form of resistance – or public political expression – must be evaluated against a prior ethical question: does it risk harming the child? As a result, resistance in schools cannot take the form of a purely political act. It is inevitably filtered through relations of care and the ethics of pedagogical responsibility. (Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press. 2005).
- 12 In the Russian educational system, school Olympiads are subject-based academic competitions in disciplines such as mathematics, history, or literature, organized at municipal, regional, and national levels. High achievement in these Olympiads is prestigious and can provide significant advantages in university admissions, including exemption from entrance exams or bonus points.
- 13 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).
- 14 In Alexei Yurchak’s analysis, hypernormalized power refers to a political condition in which official ideological discourse becomes widely recognized as detached from lived reality, yet continues to structure public life because everyone reproduces it as if it were meaningful. Power persists not through genuine belief, but through ritualized participation in a system whose artificiality is collectively understood yet rarely openly challenged. (Alexei Yurchak. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2013).



SOURCE: ANASTASIA VASILYEVA'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL, 2021

Anastasia Vasilyeva founded the Alliance of Doctors (Alyans Vrachey), an independent medical trade union. Vasilyeva criticized Vladimir Putin's response during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Alliance of Doctors was marked as a "foreign agent" already in 2021.

PROFESSIONAL as **POLITICAL**

Physicians – challengers of the Russian health care system

by **Varvara Adrianova, Ivan Ivanov, and Miroslava Borisova**

abstract

This paper aims to analyze how health professionals in Russia perceive their profession as a political issue and how the war has shaped this perception. The study focuses on healthcare providers whose narratives express explicit dissatisfaction with the Russian healthcare system, sustained criticism of it, and efforts to bring about change. Drawing on the strategic action field approach, we define these actors as challengers – that is, professionals who seek to alter the organizational field of healthcare and broader societal power relations. Medical professionals are generally considered as a politically neutral group and typically do not identify them-

selves as challengers of the social system. However, we reveal that at critical moments of war and migration, they explicitly connect their professional positions with issues of political power and political engagement. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with healthcare providers who left Russia shortly after February 2022. The analysis suggests that in the context of an authoritarian state, healthcare professionals challenge not only the organizational field but also the political order itself, thereby relinquishing claims to political neutrality in pursuit of systemic change.

KEYWORDS: Health professionals, strategic actions, institutional, political actions, healthcare system, war conflict.

This paper is aimed to analyze how health professionals in Russia perceive profession as a political issue, and how the military actions have shaped this perception. On February 24, 2022, Russia started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, causing an emergency situation and tragic consequences for Ukraine, disrupting social stability within Russia and in the whole region of Europe. Many citizens who disagreed with the state's military actions left Russia, including a distinct professional group of healthcare providers, which is the focus of this study. While those who left Russia opposed the invasion, they varied in the extent to which they had previously sought to change their professional practices and, more broadly, power relations in society.

This study focuses on healthcare providers whose narratives express explicit dissatisfaction with the Russian healthcare system, sustained criticism of it, and efforts to bring about change. Drawing on the strategic action approach, we define these actors as challengers, that is professionals who used to alter healthcare institutions, their organizational order and wider societal power relations during the last decades.

This paper explores how professional agency in the authoritarian regime was narrated with a particular focus on its “political” aspects. Medical professionals are generally perceived as a morally and politically neutral group and typically do not identify themselves as challengers of the social or political order. However, at critical moments of war and emigration, they explicitly connect their professional positions with issues of political power and political engagement.

More broadly we aim to participate in the discussion focused on understanding how prewar and wartime conditions influence different professional groups and organizational fields, a debate that has already addressed social scientists and scholars of Russian studies.¹ Our contribution would be the analysis of what professionals perceive as a *political dimension* of their professional fields under the authoritarian regime.

BEFORE THE START of the war, the healthcare system in Russia – initially inheriting the Soviet model – had been changing under numerous top-down reforms, demonstrating evidence of restricted professional autonomy and lack of professional voices in public life. However, there were some grassroots initiatives, and the previous researches have argued that their authors challenged and transformed healthcare exerting their own professional agency.² Top-down changes in healthcare were considerably shaped by the “statist” and neoliberal logics simultaneously, which both have prioritized the demographic and symbolic interests of the state, on the one hand, and introduced the principles of economic effectiveness on the other.³

Thus, grassroots initiatives focused on patient interests and

the professional notions of healthcare providers themselves were often symbolically opposed to government reforms. Rhetorically, such changes could include a shift toward more “patient-centered” or “humanistic” approaches, the integration of “evidence-based medicine” principles, and others, in practice, they could also take various forms. To emphasize that the drivers of such changes were the intentions of professionals to improve the healthcare system and that their ideas sometimes did not coincide with the expectations of patients themselves, the state, and other social actors in this field, we and other colleagues previously proposed the category of “good care”.⁴ Although it is obviously relative (as depending on the particular social perspective) and in fact can refer to quite different clinical and social practices, we use it as denoting projects and approaches (including “evidence-based medicine”, “humanistic”, “patient-centered” and others), which are articulated as meeting to the notions of professionalism rather than economic demands or state requirements.

In this way “good care” as denoting professional ideals of

healthcare provision appears to be symbolical opposition to “the system” – an emic term, used by health professionals to describe the intensive bureaucratic and political control exerted by a paternalistic state over professional work. Overregulation and demands for political loyalty are narrated as permeating all levels of healthcare – as doctors put it, “Big Brother is watching you.” As a rule medical practitioners accept these institutional norms and adapt to such control employing informal practices and strategies.⁵ However,

some professionals not only explicitly articulate a sense of being “trapped in a systemic cage,” but also recount their attempts to enact change in the face of institutional resistance.

The system puts me in a cage. I'm a hostage. The system says: 'Don't stick your head out! Do you understand?'

I say: 'I understand, but I will try and continue.' The system says: 'Well, then blame yourself!'

(interview with a midwife, 2021)

In this article, we present an analysis of narratives of health professionals focused on their relations with “the system”, referring to both, the system of healthcare and political one. We explain how they describe their efforts to implement innovations in the medical field to provide better care for their patients, which in some cases can resemble social and political movements, as they utilize protests, social critique and public visibility. Before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, professional and political concerns were rarely articulated as interconnected; our interlocutors described them as two distinct spheres of activity. Following the invasion, however, healthcare providers explicitly

“OVERREGULATION AND DEMANDS FOR POLITICAL LOYALTY ARE NARRATED AS PERMEATING ALL LEVELS OF HEALTHCARE – AS DOCTORS PUT IT, ‘BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU’.”

linked these domains. Taken together, these dynamics create a distinctive context in which professional initiatives are framed as political: medical providers pursue strategic change through grassroots activism, while the state simultaneously expands its control, reinforcing it through legal and administrative measures.

OUR AIM IN THIS paper is to demonstrate how medical professionals understand what it means to be political and how they view their own actions after the start of the full-scale invasion. We first outline the context of the transformation of Russian healthcare and present our analytical framework, explaining how we conceptualize the “professional as political”. We then describe our data, methods, and research participants. In the findings section, focusing on the micro-dynamics of challengers’ interpretations of their actions, we analyze how their understanding of power relations develops and is being articulated. This process initially emerges through their critical views of the healthcare system, with which they are dissatisfied, and subsequently through their descriptions of attempts to change specific structures within it. As they develop their initiatives, they come to recognize the necessity of making their voices public, thereby challenging existing power relations. Finally, they acknowledge that fields of politics and healthcare are deeply interconnected and that they can no longer continue their struggle under conditions of repression and war. In discussion and conclusion, we summarize how challengers transform professional concerns into political issues within the context of an authoritarian regime in Russia.

Context of the health care in Russia and position of professionals under increasing repressions

Healthcare constitutes quite a particular organizational field in post-Soviet Russia. It is characterized by two divergent features: since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has undergone continuous institutional reforms, shaped by neoliberal and managerial logics simultaneously,⁶ while still retaining fundamental elements of the Soviet healthcare paternalistic model.⁷ The system remains fairly centralized in terms of the management, funding, and regulation of medical care, therefore bureaucratic control over professional practices remains quite extensive, while market reforms open some possibilities for innovations. In recent decades, multiple institutional and organizational grassroots changes have taken place, initiated by professionals and patients, though on a limited scale and often through informal channels.⁸ In contrast, macro-level changes and reforms in the healthcare sector have been implemented through statist politics and policies.⁹

The vertical bureaucratic control and overregulation presup-



Healthcare workers in Glazov, Udmurtiya, come out for better wages and conditions, June 2019.

SOURCE: ANDREY KONOVAL/FACEBOOK

poses unconditional loyalty to rules as the basis of organizational sustainability and access to economics and symbolic resources. Most physicians and nurses in Russia are state employees, moreover, all of them are subject to military service. In this regard, they are expected to act like street-level bureaucrats with a fairly low degree of professional autonomy¹⁰ and quite high degree of political loyalty. The system maintains constant legal rigorous control over the work of medical professionals, as reflected in the growing number of criminal and administrative cases brought against healthcare workers and organizations when they were accused of breaking the law.¹¹ In particular, the attention of The Investigative Committee of Russia to health care and iatrogenic crimes¹² has recently increased. The state also recognizes the symbolic status of medical professions as an important political resource, engaging public medical professionals and health activists as political actors by recruiting them into state-supportive political parties and appointing them as deputies.¹³ In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion, the authoritarian regime increasingly repressed critical public voices – including those related to medicine – and enacted a number of laws aimed at restricting such expressions.

GIVEN OUR FOCUS on the political dimension of the profession, we briefly examine how the war and state repression have impacted professionals, especially those engaged in public activities. Since 2012, several federal laws and other legislative acts have been adopted with the aim of strengthening state control over information on the Internet and the activities of public organizations. In particular, the status of “foreign agent” has been introduced into legislation and law enforcement practices, which was initially

assigned to non-profit organizations recognized by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation as those engaged in “political activities” in Russia and receiving “funds and other property from foreign states, international and foreign organizations, foreign citizens, and stateless persons” (Federal Law No. 121-FZ of July 20, 2012). Later, in 2017, this status could be assigned to the media and, then, in 2019, – to individuals.

Although this legislation does not directly address medical organizations, some of them have received this status, that is their activities have been recognized as “political”. The independent trade union “Alliance of Doctors” was recognized as a “foreign agent” in 2021, and its leaders have been criminally charged or received threats, later the International public organization “Independent Association of Doctors” gained the same legal status in 2025. Another area of growing state control over the actions and voices of medical professionals was related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the legislation of penalties for the “fake news” about the epidemiological situation. In March 2020, amendments were adopted to the Criminal and Administrative Codes of Russia on fines or restriction of freedom for “the dissemination of knowingly false information about circumstances dangerous to the life and health of the population,” including information about COVID-19. During the pandemic, this legal norm impacted public discussions about issues such as ineffective management decisions and the insufficient provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). It significantly restricted healthcare providers’ ability to express their critical views publicly.

With the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in the spring of 2022, amendments to the administrative and criminal codes were introduced, prohibiting the use of the term “war” to describe the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and effectively banning anti-war public statements. Although these measures do not directly target the healthcare sector, they significantly restrict freedom of speech – an issue that has proven particularly sensitive for public figures, including medical professionals who have condemned the war. Overall, public expression has become increasingly suppressed across professional and civic spheres. Against this backdrop, demands for loyalty from both professionals and citizens increased dramatically after the full-scale invasion. As we show below, this shift profoundly shaped practitioners’ understanding of politics and its interconnection with healthcare.

Conceptual framework: interconnection of professional and political

In this paper we define the process of changing the established institutional order in the given organizational field of healthcare

as “political” in a broad sense. By institutional order, following the institutional logics perspective, we understand a domain organized around cornerstone social norms, whose cultural symbols and material practices structure actors’ behavior and sensemaking.¹⁴ The concept of “the professional is political” applies to institutional and professional micropolitics, addressing issues of power imbalances, inequality, and societal change. This perspective opposes the notion of the apolitical neutrality of medical expert knowledge, professions, and medical institutions. We advance this notion in a manner that echoes the feminist motto “the personal is political” – understood as inherently related to power – as articulated by women’s movements since the 1970s, which sought to challenge the foundational structures of patriarchy.

OTHER SCHOLARS worldwide analyzed some of professional projects as political to explore, for example, how social workers and counsellors empower their clients,¹⁵ how micropolitics in professional knowledge are implemented in psychotherapy.¹⁶ Medical professionals are also involved in struggles for power and appear not to be politically neutral.¹⁷ In the field of reproductive health and maternity care, both care-providers and receivers often act

as the challengers of the system, since the issues of reproduction inevitably concern the moral order and the state pronatalist agendas.¹⁸ There are multiple examples of professional activism in maternity care in Russia, which comprises an extremely pronatalist field with limited professional autonomy.¹⁹ Conservative professionals, whose work is to maintain the institutional order, may also try to influence politics.²⁰

Researchers problematize the symbolic neutrality of medicine and medical professions in multiple

contexts, and, in particular, in those framed by military or political conflicts. Cases of Palestinian health professionals in Israel,²¹ medical care provided to the protest activists in Egypt²² and Turkey,²³ exodus of doctors from Iraq,²⁴ politicization of medicine in relation to inequality in Nepal,²⁵ and other examples of physicians’ participation and involvement in protest movements or military conflicts²⁶ demonstrate how this professional group can manifest itself as a political actor. Researchers demonstrate how physician-activists or intellectuals become publicly critical in times of crisis or social change, with their social role transforming into that of critical intellectuals.²⁷ Michael Kennedy²⁸ describes how “normally apolitical” physicians in Poland during the 1980s acted as critical intellectuals, who redefined problems of the healthcare as ones associated with the political system, and in this way reinforced social change. He argued that the conditions of instability can create opportunities for professionals/intellectuals to become critical actors.

“THERE ARE MULTIPLE EXAMPLES OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVISM IN MATERNITY CARE IN RUSSIA, WHICH COMPRISES AN EXTREMELY PRONATALIST FIELD WITH LIMITED PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY.”



Official image of Vladimir Putin examining a hospital in the Moscow village of Kommunarka for patients with suspected coronavirus infection, March 24, 2020.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Metro in Moscow during the Covid-19 pandemic. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Physicians in Russia were mostly not directly involved in political activity related to their professional work, unlike, for example, eco-activists²⁹ or journalists,³⁰ whose activities were politicized even before the war and who extensively were forced to leave the country. However, some of Russian health professionals gradually have started to articulate a critical standpoint and begin challenging the authoritarian system, in a manner similar to how Kennedy described Polish physicians under the Soviet regime. These physicians confronted the bureaucratized, paternalistic authoritarian state, which limits their professional autonomy and represses critical voices.

IN ORDER TO analytically explain how changes in such a centralized and over-regulated organizational field as healthcare in Russia are possible not only in the top-down manner, but also through grassroots initiatives, we refer to the Strategic Action Field model proposed by Fligstein and McAdam.³⁴ This approach describes the organizational field as consisting of actors of different scales (including state-dominated fields), whose actions are aimed either at maintaining the existing institutional order or at changing it. The “*organizational field*” of healthcare consists of the relations and interactions between different collective and individual social actors, including “individuals, groups, divisions of an organization, firms, universities, nonprofits, social movement organizations, departments or ministries in governments, states, and intergovernmental organizations”.³² The possibilities for actors to have power as a control over strategic resources in a given field vary, and actors are differently positioned in relation to institutional stability or change. Those social actors “*who wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization*” are considered to be *incumbents* of the field while *challengers* act to relocate resources in a given context and to undertake *strategic actions* to possess more control or challenge the current power (im)balance of the organizational field.³³

Applying this conceptual framework to analyze empirical data introduced in the following section, we aim to demonstrate that despite the prevailing expectations of loyalty (both organizational and political) from health professionals in Russia, some of them have tried and are trying to change the existing organizational and social order. We argue that the challenge to the system and the bottom-up voice were possible in authoritarian society. Some professionals have become increasingly aware of numerous healthcare problems and have identified opportunities for improvement, referring to more “patient-centered” care, “evidence-based practice” or other approaches. We conceptualize professional initiatives launched in the interests of patients or for the sake of professional logic, as challengers’ intentions to provide “good care”, which is opposed to the “system” – current organizational order maintained by incumbents. In this paper we intend to analyze how initially very practical and professional challenges begin to be redefined in political terms, and how the contexts of war and growing repressions increasingly interconnect the professional and the political agendas, at least in the narratives of health professionals we interviewed.

Data, methods and research participants

The empirical evidence for this article was based on 15 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews, collected during fall-winter 2022–2023 after the start of the full-scale invasion. We interviewed those professionals who had already left Russia after February 24, 2022, but before the announcement of military mobilization (September 21, 2022). In addition the selection criteria were their professional activism, operationalized as attempts in various forms to change the healthcare system. We have collected interviews with physicians, heads of clinics and departments, and health-related NGOs who publicly criticized the system and/or initiated projects aimed at changing the approach towards healthcare before leaving Russia. We interviewed eleven

men and four women, whose average age was 41.3 years. They are experts in different fields of medicine, and all of them used to be residents of metropolitan areas and a majority of them had public visibility via different media projects.

All of them have an explicit anti-war position, and the majority of our informants supported opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Some of our interlocutors served as medical experts assessing his health, while others were involved in legal cases related to critical public statements. Additionally, several informants drafted and signed an open letter in 2023 urging the Russian president to improve Alexei Navalny's prison conditions, which were widely recognized as torturous and harmful to his health, when he was alive. Over 600 healthcare providers joined this public campaign within two days.³⁴ Our informants also participated in other protest actions and civic movements in the prewar years, driven by concerns over electoral fraud, and later by opposition to the outbreak of war, they signed petitions, or donated to oppositional NGOs. Some of their public statements were explicitly tied to political issues and several of them had experience of imprisonment or faced administrative or criminal charges before the emigration.

THE FOCUS OF THIS research does not imply that all challengers left Russia after the invasion, nor that all physicians who left the country were challengers. However, these selection criteria help ensure greater safety for research participants, as they do not risk publicly voicing their professional or political views. Additionally, our informants represent an extreme case of confrontation between the system and the challengers, as most were forced to leave both the country and their profession. Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation and was audio-recorded.

The data analysis was based on the key principles of thematic analysis:³⁵ we firstly transcribed the interviews verbatim, then carefully read the transcripts and discussed with each other the most saturated pieces of data. After that we inductively coded the data particularly focusing on interlocutors' notions of their professional activism, relations with colleagues and the system of healthcare and the state, as well as their reflections on their civic and political stances. Then codes were grouped to several sub-themes and again were discussed within the research team. As a result, four main themes were established as key explanations of relations between professional actions and political issues. The findings section of the article presents these themes and some of the sub-themes consistently.

For the purpose of data triangulation, in our analysis we have also approached two other qualitative datasets, which helped us to highlight the aspects of the healthcare system that push professionals to become "challengers" in certain cases and to leave

the country in others. The second dataset comes from a study on pregnancy and childbirth in Russia, conducted between 2019 and 2021. This dataset consists of semi-structured interviews (n = 24), focus-groups with midwives (n = 2), observations in hospitals and medical professional events, and document analysis collected and analyzed to describe how different social actors challenge the system of maternity care. The dataset enabled us to develop the conceptual framework of "professional as political," since it uncovers how health professionals challenge the system of healthcare.

The third dataset comes from the "Professional Trajectories of Surgeons in Russian Healthcare" project and consists of 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with cardiac surgeons collected in 2021. This dataset examines the institutional settings and resources that enable some professionals to successfully follow a structured path of professionalization in surgery, as well as those factors that, in contrast, drive some surgeons to leave the field of cardiac surgery, the medical profession, or even the country where they work and reside.

"HEALTH PROFESSIONALS-CHALLENGERS SAY THAT THERE ARE HARDLY THE PROPER CONDITIONS IN RUSSIAN HEALTHCARE TO WORK 'AS NECESSARY' FOR THE SAKE OF THEIR PATIENTS."

All the interview excerpts quoted in the following sections come from the first dataset, collected in 2022, as two others were used as supplementary and for the purpose of methodological rigor. We attribute these quotes only by the informants' medical specialization and the year the data was collected, and do not indicate research participants' gender, age, or location in order to avoid the risk of de-anonymization.

Findings: Medical professionals as challengers

Professionals criticizing the system

We found a common expression of critical views on the healthcare system in the narratives of our interlocutors. Health professionals-challengers say that there are hardly the proper conditions in Russian healthcare to work "as necessary" for the sake of their patients. The system limits health professionals' autonomy in their clinical, organizational, and communicative tasks since it is recognized as not person-oriented, neither toward care receivers nor to care providers.

Challengers talk about the state officials, healthcare managers and administrators, multiple instructions, written and verbal codes, sanctions, insecurity, lack of resources, corruption, habitual practices, etc., as constituting and enhancing "the system". "The system" has a connotation of Leviathan but also has a concrete face and concrete rules. Our interlocutors refer to this metaphor emphasizing that the system resists innovations and impedes the "good care" they want to provide. Our task here is to reconstruct "the system" from the perspective of challengers as their critique is the starting point for the interpretation of the power relations.

Hierarchy and personalization of the system

The system is described as hierarchical, over-centralized, over-bureaucratized, corrupted, rigid, non-effective, and non-sensitive to human needs. It penetrates professional interactions, clinical work and medical education, healthcare management and coordination of the work. During the pandemic of COVID-19 and, especially after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the situation became worse, and the system is described as becoming even more rigid and repressive. It is compared to an “army, prison, or concentration camp” (especially during the Corona crisis) (41 years old, interviewed in 2022). It does not mean that the system is not effective in every segment and does not produce good care at all; however, such possibilities are quite limited.

On the level of hierarchical interactions, as physicians argue, the healthcare system acts through personification and loyalty. Concrete persons in chief positions and personalized hierarchical relationships in organization are crucial for the sustainability of the institutional order. Hierarchy and loyalty are primary pillars of the organizational field of healthcare. If the head of a clinic or department is not a competent physician, or corrupted, or follow outdated clinical approach this can lead to a “cult of personality” (39 years old, interviewed in 2022) “or feudalism” (37 years old, interviewed in 2023). In other words, the management and communicative style of medical organizations are described in some cases as patrimonial and isomorphic to the authoritarian state at the same time. Every health practitioner in such an organization is expected to depend on such a leader and should be loyal, not challenging routine practices and the existing organizational order. Professionals say that there is no legitimate space for voicing problems and solving them:

We had a very hierarchical suppressive work culture, with you being constantly suppressed in all initiatives.
(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Even if professionals-challengers manage to introduce a new approach in a concrete department or clinic (more often in a private one), they narrate the emerging problems of coordination and consistency with other, less innovative medical facilities and organizations. As a result the system as rigid and hierarchical, requiring loyalty, remains sustainable.

Critique of commercialization and bureaucratization of the system

As our interlocutors argue, chief physicians as managers are often motivated by economic or bureaucratic indicators required by the healthcare system. Our interlocutors shared stories about the clinic administrations which demand from their employees to force patients to undergo unnecessary procedures that generate profit, refuse less invasive and more comfortable procedures if they are less profitable, and compel patients to stay in the hospital when treatment could be provided outpatient. Clinics are often described as unprepared to treat patients with complicated conditions or pathologies, as this does not align

with the system’s rules and does not generate additional revenue.

Our interlocutors tell that chiefs and loyal providers (incumbents of the field) do not support changes that could reduce their material status quo. Challengers hardly receive support in their attempts to make patients’ needs primary in relation to indicators of financial efficiency. Officials continue to be guided by commercial and bureaucratic logics, which in professionals’ narratives is assigned with political meaning as well:

The system is run by officials who are guided by bureaucratic logic. For officials, the main thing is the distribution of (money) flow [...] And this is connected to economic and political interests. (42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

This suggests that corruption operates not merely as a means of personal material gain, but also as a mechanism of political hierarchical loyalty, serving the interests of state authorities.

According to challengers, the system enacts the bureaucratic logic intersecting with the market one; this intersection manifests itself in numerous orders, instructions with low efficiency, and growing bureaucratic control; providers have to follow instructions, even if they are contradictory or senseless or work against patients’ needs. Our informants complained:

Their (officials’) motivation is to regulate, prohibit, prevent and streamline. (42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Bureaucracy penetrates both clinical practices and medical education. [...] the number of audits that we have to go through are absolutely meaningless.
(38 years old, interviewed in 2022)

The system is described as enforcing strict adherence to its rules, but challengers confess that they often break these rules in order to meet patients’ needs. In such cases they found themselves in a position of insecurity and legal vulnerability.

Critique of the legal insecurity in the system

The system is described as constantly producing legal risks for professionals, and the dominating narrative in this group is that:

Every doctor could be prosecuted.
(38 years old, interviewed in 2022)

The majority of our interlocutors acknowledged that they were unable to follow all the rules, and that there is a lot of “non-legal” clinical practice in routine practices, and even more in innovative practices:

[...] all the time you violate some law or legal rules because they create barriers.
(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

It is just impossible to bypass all the sanitary norms and nit-picking. (37 years old, interviewed in 2023).

According to physicians, it is impossible to:

[...]work honestly due to corruption and economic pressure and due to a million violations in routine work. (37 years old, interviewed in 2023).

Such semi or non-legal practices are morally justified by challengers, as they serve the clinical needs of patients and public health in general. This stands in contrast to the corrupt practices associated with some incumbent doctors and administrators, who are described as acting for their own selfish interests.

Due to these restrictions in the healthcare landscape, our informants note that only a small number of clinics, primarily in large cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, are able to innovate and provide “good care”. Challengers cite examples of effective work in new departments, clinics, and health-related NGOs; however, these organizations remain rare and have become less sustainable since the start of the full-scale invasion, as demands for total loyalty have increased and resources have dwindled. Challengers criticize the numerous barriers within the system and then try to change some rules within it.

Professionals’s attempts of changing the system: description of actions

Building on their critical perception of the healthcare system, our interlocutors recount efforts to reform specific structures within it. We conceptualize these efforts as strategic actions aimed at effecting systemic change, and in the following section, we analyze the way they describe these actions.

Professionals aimed at the humanization of the system

Challengers question the rigid hierarchical structure of the system and direct their actions toward reallocating resources and shifting power dynamics. These efforts challenge existing models of care, including their bureaucratization and commercialization. The spectrum of strategic actions described by our interlocutors is wide, ranging from changes of local medical care protocols to educational and expert projects aimed at establishing new institutions (such as medical departments, clinics, schools, and NGOs), as well as lawmaking initiatives. All these projects seek to bring about significant changes in the system for the sake of patients’ needs and professional ideals.

Particular approaches introduced to healthcare by challengers could be framed differently (as more person-centered or more evidence-based, for example); however the common idea was to put the interests of patients over bureaucratic standards

and economic benefits. In practice this presupposed that first of all patient personality and needs should be taken into account and prioritized:

And [finally] you understand that we completely forgot about a very important human component; that is, we are like an engine: we fix a person, but we completely forget that, in addition to some physical cogs, arms and legs, he also has a huge emotional sphere, which is important to a person. (41 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Such initiatives introduced new styles of professional communication and the new standards of care in order to “change the attitude towards a patient so that s/he is not scared and hurt” (53 years old, interviewed in 2022), and, in general, aims at the patients’ empowerment:

[..] this is a project that provides direct information support to patients and, at the same time, forms a patient community. And forms patients as a kind of powerful force” (43 years old, interviewed in 2022).

“CHALLENGERS QUESTION THE RIGID HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM AND DIRECT THEIR ACTIONS TOWARD REALLOCATING RESOURCES AND SHIFTING POWER DYNAMICS.”

In some other cases healthcare providers talked about their attempts to introduce “evidence-based” or “international best” practices, which at times conflicted with the formal medical standards set by state regulatory bodies. They also seek to enhance economic and organizational efficiency. These efforts are important for them as contributing to a broader movement toward humanizing the healthcare system and making it more adaptable to the needs of both patients and healthcare workers. To carry out these actions, professionals tell what resources they have to mobilize and actors they should engage to challenge the established organizational order.

Actors and resources for change: leaders, networking, and knowledge

Most of our interlocutors were activists in their field of expertise and opinion leaders committed to both personal and institutional development. They described themselves as willing to take responsibility, even in high-risk projects and environments, and often expressed what one of our interlocutors described as an “itch for change” (37 years old, interviewed in 2022). However, they emphasized that meaningful change within the system is impossible without allies and additional resources. Consequently, forming connections with like-minded colleagues and creating professional networks became crucial. Within such networks, “innovative mentors” were identified as particularly important. As such were denoted senior colleagues who supported their careers in the early



A mobile clinic used to provide health care to people at remote railway stations.



Ambulance car-based GAZelle is the most common type of ambulance in Russia. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

stages – offering training, sharing expertise, and inspiring a commitment to improved care. Within healthcare organizations, such senior allies were described as crucial: the support of a department head or clinic director is often mentioned as a key condition for effectively challenging the system. These leaders could grant greater professional autonomy – especially compared to more conservative medical institutions – and act as protectors against state regulatory bodies. Many challengers later described their own positions as leadership roles in healthcare organizations, where, as health managers, they focused on building teams of like-minded professionals. They consistently stressed that medicine is, above all, a collective practice grounded in teamwork.

THE SEARCH FOR ALLIES and like-minded colleagues extends beyond the state-funded healthcare sector. Our interlocutors told us about their networks, which included private medical institutions, NGOs, educational and research initiatives, patient movements, and international professional organizations. Professional expertise and internationally recognized standards served for them as vital markers for critique and challenging often ineffective rules governing the system. Consequently, publicity, media engagement, and the open dissemination were important for them for sharing expert knowledge – both among colleagues and patients in efforts to reform the system.

Professionals tell about their resistance to formal regulations. Many interlocutors noted that the very possibility of not following – or deliberately violating – certain formal rules was often the only way to bring about meaningful change.

Guys, if you act strictly according to the law, then nothing will work. Because the law puts such impracticable obstacles. Therefore, we must... act in the interests of the patients [and not according to the law].

(38 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Private medicine is presented as offering greater opportunities for innovation, as it is less bureaucratized and better resourced in terms of material support. As a result, many of our interlocutors eventually chose to leave state-funded organizations due to significant restrictions on their professional autonomy. Effective management, strong interpersonal communication, and team-building skills also emerged as key resources for fostering innovation in healthcare.

For quite some time now, I have been devoting most of my time to the organization; that is, working with personnel, with our employees, and building non-clinical processes. (42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Leadership, team-building, networking, and the dissemination of expert knowledge were introduced as crucial components for driving innovation and challenging the system. Prior to the start of the full-scale invasion, many projects and services initiated by professional activists achieved notable success. Some had amassed over two million followers on social media through their professional expertise; others led medical organizations, innovative departments, or educational, media, and charitable initiatives. However, these changes are described as coming with considerable struggle. Even before the start of the full-scale invasion, many challengers expressed skepticism about the potential for large-scale change within healthcare. As one interlocutor noted, “The system as a whole does not change: the system (not only medical) grinds people” (39 years old, interviewed in 2022). In some cases, this critical perspective on the system served as a point of transforming efforts to improve healthcare into political acts and blurring the boundaries between professional and political engagement. They concluded that it is impossible to bring about meaningful change in healthcare without broader reforms (42 years old, interviewed in 2023).

Becoming political: “no medicine without politic”

In the course of developing their initiatives, challengers come to understand the necessity of making their voices public, which broadens their arena of challenge to power. They explicitly state that “healthcare becomes political.” Our interlocutors interpret significant professional problems as systemic and seek to change power relations within the field, redistribute resources, and gain greater control. These actions are political in nature, as they involve the problematization of power structures, which often provokes resilience, sanctions, and repression from the system.

Critical Voice is Perceived as Political

Although the criticism of the system we described previously cannot be considered as directly political, incumbents are sensitive to any critical remarks, and their resistance highlights the commitment to maintaining the existing power relations, which challengers seek to influence on and change. Professional criticism is perceived as an attack that violates loyalty, and silence, as well as adherence to the existing status quo, which is expected from professionals:

When you justifiably tear them to pieces, [tell them] that you are doing medicine poorly, actually, guys. [You get] back: ‘Oh, you bastard, traitor! You wash our dirty linen! Well, yes, it’s politics.
(43 years old, interviewed in 2022)

The system of the health care is considered to be homological to the authoritarian state as a whole:

Honoring the loyal – yes. That is, it’s an attempt to avoid discussing problems, and, as a result, an inability to solve them. This structure mirrors our state system, which means that censorship prevails. It means you can’t criticize anything. (31 years old, interviewed in 2022)

A key response of the system to criticism and public voice according to our interlocutor, is censorship, which serves both as a tool for the political suppression of dissenting voices and as a marker of the system’s – and its incumbents’ – resistance to change:

But as soon as it [professional initiative] reaches the level of policies, recommendations, and here we already mean not only standards, guidelines, and hospital management for departments but also these population-based recommendations, like the ones of Rospotrebnadzor (controlling body) and the Ministry of Health, here it is turning into politics. They are called ‘policies’ for a reason. Such recommendations affect large groups of people. And this is much more responsibility. And here we encounter censorship. And it is very strong here. (31 years old, interviewed in 2022)

The quotation above demonstrates that those professional decisions and initiatives that have the potential to influence large groups of the population are defined by a physician directly as political. Such changes, according to them, cause resistance of the system, which can even force out professionals-activists in some cases:

We climbed too high [in reforming attempts] and it became like, and some kind of political games began, which kind of interfered. Well, I left [the workplace] because of it. (37 years old, interviewed in 2022)

“No medicine without politics”

As some professionals say, it is impossible without systemic changes to alter healthcare provision significantly, and they, in turn, are possible only together with changes in the political order: “There is no medicine without politics” (36 years old, interviewed in 2022), as one of our interlocutors claims. Healthcare policies and legislative initiatives in the health sector are perceived as interconnected with broader political changes. At the same time, political changes, according to our interlocutors, are impossible since the authoritarian state does not tolerate any competitors for control and power, and such a logic of regulation permeates the entire *vertical of power*. Thus, even those challengers who were aware of the need to change healthcare policies and attempted to participate in policy-making evaluated this experience as completely unsuccessful. They expressed disappointment with the results of their reform efforts and emphasized that healthcare and politics are deeply intertwined.

Although I understand perfectly well that there can be no ‘medical’ policy without ‘political’ policy. But somehow, nevertheless, it seemed to me that the balance of the bad and the very bad was maintained at some stage and it was possible to limit ourselves to participation in the organization of health care and health policy-making only [...] it was an absolutely bad experience, nothing came out of what I wanted. It was a complete failure. Yes, I participated in a couple or three [nation-wide, law-making] projects, a complete failure.
(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Even before the start of the full-scale invasion, the challengers largely faced the inability to change the system. The lack of legal, regulatory, and public institutions capable of improving healthcare is reflected in barriers that depend on broader societal and political conditions. Health professionals (these statements were made retrospectively, after our interlocutors had migrated) express frustration with the current system and believe that meaningful improvements in healthcare are only possible if civil and political institutions operate in a more democratic manner:

There needs to be an interaction between ordinary society and the authorities. [...] There should be turnover;

there should be mechanisms – like social elevators – that give a voice to representatives of grassroots politics, so they can convey the interests of their communities and regions. These voices should be coordinated, with mechanisms for discussion and consensus-building.

(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Our interlocutors believe that dialogue between society and the government is essential for meaningful change – by this, they mean democratic values and the rule of law. Yet such conditions, inherently political in nature, are absent. Many also consider these changes to be the responsibility of public intellectuals to facilitate such dialogue and articulate societal problems.

They spoke of a lack of professional autonomy, increasing censorship, and growing demands for loyalty. As a result, they felt unable to influence policy-making in the health sector – just as they are excluded from other forms of political action. Moreover, the increase in repressions after the start of full-scale invasion of Ukraine in Russia is described as creating a rising risk of reprisals, shrinking personal and professional freedoms, and expanding state control. Professional work is closely connected to law and democratic values:

A doctor, as a person of a creative specialty, feels best in a free country, in a free country. That is, dictatorship and repression, and the fear of constant denunciation [make it impossible to work as it should], and these are quite real things: doctors are denounced by nurses, nurses are denounced by doctors, both are denounced by patients.

(38 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Though doctors' opinions are retrospective, they say that all of these problems intensified and became nearly unbearable for professionals after February 2022. Under conditions of repression, it became impossible for them to speak out publicly. Unwilling to demonstrate political loyalty, some chose to leave the country.

The system at war: the interconnection between professional and political

Our interlocutors left the country after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but even the preceding period they described as if the already felt probable “collapse”:

But I always had the feeling that it would not end so easily with ‘grandfathers’ [old men in top authorities] [...] That it would be either a political collapse or an economic collapse. Well, of course, it was hard to imagine a [full-scale] war.

(37 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Professionals began to speak explicitly about politics as interconnected with their work during the war and at the crucial turning point when they decided to emigrate. We will show what evidence they provide regarding the system as consisting of personal, political, and professional dimensions.

Professionals perceive the system as depriving personal security

Some of our interlocutors, as citizens, participated in opposition and anti-war protests – some of them even faced prosecution. The war has brought personal security into question, directly linking it to the broader wartime context. Many of our interlocutors reflected on the personal and family's risks posed by military authoritarianism, citing the absence of free elections, political repression, and the erosion of personal and civil liberties. The war made it clear for them that no individual remains untouched by politics; it is no longer possible to simply carry out professional duties “as usual” when basic personal protection, freedom, and security are lacking in society.

“PROFESSIONALS BEGAN TO SPEAK EXPLICITLY ABOUT POLITICS AS INTERCONNECTED WITH THEIR WORK DURING THE WAR AND AT THE CRUCIAL TURNING POINT WHEN THEY DECIDED TO EMIGRATE.”

It's really scary when your personal freedoms are violated [...] I could be drafted to the army as a medical worker [...] with no guarantees that I won't go to jail for calling the war a war, or that no one will take away my apartment. Personal security was severely compromised on February 24 [...] Unfortunately, it seems the country is no longer safe in many respects – personal freedoms, civil freedoms.

(40 years old, interviewed in 2023)

One of our interlocutors narrated the story of the decision to leave the country: after just a pacifist post in social media, generally framed as “Peace to the world!”, the chief of the medical organization asked to delete it, and, as the doctor refused, fired a “traitor”. Many professionals fear being drafted to the army – since all medical workers in Russia are counted as military reservists – or facing prosecution for taking an anti-war position. Physicians describe their decision to leave the country as both an emotional and moral one, even if they had previously considered emigration or viewed themselves as privileged and relatively prepared for it.

However, some physicians have a special moral stance, for which they now could be prosecuted: as one of our informants says “a doctor cannot support the war in any form” (40 years old, interviewed in 2023). Doctors say that they “lost motivation for professional work in Russia” (39 years old, interviewed in 2022), “lost trust in people and society” (43 years old, interviewed in 2022, 39 years old, interviewed in 2022); they are far from being professionally neutral in their values. Leaving the country became the desirable though very difficult option for them since the medical profession is nationally based (educa-

tion, certification, formal acceptance, etc.). However, they refuse to adapt themselves to repressions and military aggression, to collaborate and this is described in moral terms of deprivation of the human dignity and professional values:

I absolutely do not think that this is normal, I do not think that it can be tolerated... I really do not want to adapt, I refuse to do it at all. It seems to me that this really changes human dignity and something else that's an inner feeling. Then I see no perspective for anything at all. Let's just say I don't see a future for my work.

(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Professionals describe the system as losing legality and threatening professional freedom

Physicians report that the system, understood as a set of rules, institutions, and professional structures, could no longer be trusted once they experienced prosecution as challengers. According to one doctor, the rule of law and civic rights no longer exist, even though they had been constrained before.

The country. It no longer exists. That's it. Let's sort of list what we have left there. The courts, maybe there are? Maybe there's a parliament? [...] It's like the last fig leaf has been dropped. Are there any laws? There aren't any. Can the cops be trusted? No. Can the prosecutor's office be trusted? Can universities be trusted? Doctors, maybe? Who can be trusted there? Is there anyone you can trust in the country? There is no one. No one.

(43 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Another doctor clarifies how this is directly connected to medical practice as the war destroys the legal rules and legal defense:

The legal framework, it just doesn't exist anymore, everyone just laughs at it. You need at least some kind of legal framework in which you can defend your (professional) interests. And that's all dead too.

(42 years old, interviewed in 2023)

They say that healthcare is inseparable from the political structures, mirroring its structure, as one informant puts it. Both are organized in a military-style hierarchical manner, which has led to the suppression of autonomous voices and initiatives. The military, the state, and medicine have become similar repressive systems of power with rigid hierarchies, which overlook both individual and collective well-being. As one informant noted "If politicians don't care about people, all sectors respond in the same way. Medicine is the most sensitive" (37 years old, interviewed in 2023), another one narrated similar notion:

Both, the state and medical hierarchy presuppose subordination of juniors without autonomy and initiative.

When the war started, it became clear [...] all the (medical) organizations copy this structure of the state, our statehood. These are primarily subordinate organizations of the military and medical type [...] this subordination, this hierarchy of our state, this nonsense that the junior has no right to address the senior. It is absolutely identical simply.

(31 years old, interviewed in 2022)

The majority of our interlocutors told us that they had ceased their innovative clinical, educational, or social projects in Russia, as they lack the resources or the ability to continue. The political risks are high, and continuing their work has become morally untenable for them. They say that their allies have either reduced their support or left the country. While some of their innovations persist, the professionals who migrated are seen as important leaders. As one informant noted:

Doctors are not replaceable [...] The doctors who left were well-known, highly experienced, capable of teaching and leading, with significant leadership experience.

(38 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Our informants point to international isolation, lack of resources, and anticipated shortages of equipment and medicines as concrete barriers to professional work during the war and under political sanctions. They also report a reduction in funding for their initiatives, as businesses either left the country, suffered from sanctions, or became hesitant to support innovative activities. Before the start war, they struggled within the healthcare system to maintain personal and professional autonomy and power, as well as to promote practices focused on the collective good. While the system was repressive, it remained relatively porous. However, after the start of the full-scale invasion, the system is viewed as a morally unacceptable, hierarchical, and repressive totality.

What did professionals regret?

Professionals who understand that politics and medicine are deeply interconnected are disappointed in their own previous efforts to change local practices or the public health system and not the system in general:

I struggled with the medical system. [...] But pressure appeared on a higher level.

(43 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Creating our own projects, we did not take into account the system.

(53 years old, interviewed in 2022)

They conclude that the *reason* "why we all are in deep shit" can be explained by professional political neutrality and indifference. They regret that they did not recognize and articulate the connection between health care and political system, even they participated previously in political protests as a citizens:

The position that I'm quietly doing my job here, and everything else does not concern me is very [...] unpromising. It's very, very dangerous, and that's exactly what gets us to where we are right now.

(41 years old, interviewed in 2022)

Our informants highlight the moral superiority of those professionals-challengers who remained in Russia and continue to struggle with the system from within. However, they do not want to return to Russia, or would do so only under radical changes, when the figure of an independent citizen emerges and the state exists for the sake of such citizens. They express doubt about the very existence of the "citizen," understood as personal rights and freedoms they had sought to uphold (albeit in a limited way) before the war in their attempts to effect change. As one participant put it:

In Russia, a citizen should appear on the political arena as a personality ['lichnost' in Russian]. Not some abstract Russians, but a citizen should emerge for whose sake the state exists and functions.

(38 years old, interviewed in 2023)

Discussion. Professionals challenging the system

In this paper we argue that professionals can be considered as political actors in an authoritarian state when they try to challenge the system of power in order to improve medical care. Institutional change entails ongoing confrontation with the bureaucratic and authoritarian Leviathan that resists disruptions to the established order. These confrontations are not isolated incidents but part of a continuous struggle for "good care" embodying professional agency. This struggle also exposes structural limitations: no matter how well professionals define problems or build alliances, their efforts repeatedly collide with the political nature of the healthcare system itself. Many professionals-innovators initially believed that professional networks and expertise alone would be sufficient for meaningful change. Yet, as initiatives grew and challenged the core institutional logic, they encountered a powerful reality: incumbents – the defenders of the status quo – are not only other healthcare professionals or administrators but political actors wielding state authority.

Following the escalation of the Russo-Ukraine war, the healthcare system became increasingly repressive, demanding greater loyalty from them as both citizens and professionals. The state developed legal and administrative frameworks to politically label those who criticize or attempt to change it. Some health professionals used to criticize the healthcare system for its rigid

hierarchical power, bureaucratization, commercialization, and lack of legal security. After February 2022, the system's resistance to change intensified. The public voice of professionals became increasingly repressed. As repression intensified during the war, many professionals found it impossible to continue working as they believed they should; they felt personally insecure and professionally constrained. Some of them chose to leave the country, while those who stayed became increasingly invisible under repressive conditions.

Publicly visible initiatives triggered broader reactions from the state, reframing local professional change into political confrontation. This revealed one of the key features of the organizational field that many challengers had underestimated previously: healthcare in Russia is deeply embedded in the political machinery of the state, and professional change inevitably collides with political control. Actions taken just at the level of local organizations or professional communities proved to be unsustainable. Ultimately, the boundary between the professional and the

political became impossible to ignore. Professionals were compelled to reconsider both their strategies and their roles within an authoritarian context they could no longer navigate safely.

Conclusion

This article illustrates that healthcare professionals in Russia operate within a highly politicized and authoritarian context, in which their work challenges a centralized, bureaucratic, and paternalistic healthcare system. The study demonstrates how personal and political dimensions become intertwined when professionals attempt to contest and transform the healthcare system. We analyze how physicians – particularly those who have left Russia – assess their ability to change and challenge both the healthcare system and the political regime. We argue that under authoritarian regime, healthcare professionals, at critical moments such as war and the decision to emigrate, come to realize that their professional work cannot be totally isolated from political engagement. In retrospect, they realized that in their attempts to change professional practices and the organizational field, they were forced to challenge the political order itself. This meant relinquishing their claim to political neutrality in pursuit of systemic change. ✖

Varvara Adrianova, Ivan Ivanov, and Miroslava Borisova are all independent researchers writing under pseudonyms.

“AS REPRESSION INTENSIFIED DURING THE WAR, MANY PROFESSIONALS FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE WORKING AS THEY BELIEVED THEY SHOULD; THEY FELT PERSONALLY INSECURE AND PROFESSIONALLY CONSTRAINED.”

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Volunteers rescuing seabirds and cleaning up the beach near the city of Anapa after the December 2024 Black Sea oil spill from sunken tankers. The oil spill revived temporary cooperation between authorities and environmental actors.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

FROM ADAPTATION TO RESISTANCE

Divergence of environmental activism in wartime Russia

by **Doriana Althier, Maria Tysiachniouk, and Juha Kotilainen**

abstract

This article analyses how environmental activism in Russia has been reshaped under wartime authoritarianism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on 34 semi-structured interviews with representatives of environmental organizations and initiatives conducted between 2022 and 2025, it examines how repression, co-optation, and nationalist politicization have transformed the field of environmental engagement. The article argues that the Russian state has reorganized the environmental field through the expansion of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) and the promotion of sovereignty-centered narratives such as

“sovereign ecology” and green patriotism. While repression remains the main driver of depoliticization, GONGOs redefine the boundaries of legitimate environmental engagement by embedding ecological discourse within narratives of national sovereignty. Independent NGOs and grassroots initiatives have responded differently. These dynamics reveal how wartime authoritarianism restructures environmental activism.

KEYWORDS: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, environmental movement, GONGOs in Russia, grassroots activism, political opportunity structures.

We examine how environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia have transformed their strategies and activities under Russia's autocratic regime since 2022. In the long term, the environmental movement in Russia has been a prominent example of social activism, evolving amid societal and political changes over the decades. Originating as a volunteer movement during the Soviet Union, the environmental movement played a key role in shaping civil society in the 1990s, in part through internationally funded projects and other international cooperation, and it kept globally significant environmental issues, such as climate change, but also more general values, such as democracy, on the societal agenda in Russia.¹ However, since the late 2000s, a general politically conservative shift in Russia and increasing state control in society have hindered international collaboration and strengthened pro-state environmental organizations. The introduction of the laws on foreign agents in 2012 and undesirable organizations in 2015 significantly impacted environmental NGOs by leading to many environmental NGOs being labelled as foreign agents and restricting their funding opportunities from abroad.² In the face of these challenges, many environmental NGOs have adapted by relinquishing international funding, changing their names, or continuing their work informally.³

In Russia, autocratic policies and actions have intensified following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The war against Ukraine has been accompanied by a further tightening of governmental control in Russian society and purposeful reinforcement of a conservative ideology, leading to laws criminalizing criticism of the state and expanding the definition of foreign agent in legislation. The state's crackdown on civil society has resulted in the closure of independent media and the dismantling of key infrastructures for activism. Repressive policies that had targeted independent NGOs before the most recent phase of the war have been enforced more strongly after February 2022. Notably, amendments have been added that have strengthened the Foreign Agent Law⁴ and the Undesirable Organizations Law.⁵ In addition, the Law on Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence, which came into force in December 2022 and was amended in 2023, created a single register maintained by the Ministry of Justice, and it lists selected NGOs, media outlets, unregistered groups, and individuals as foreign agents. Importantly, organizations no longer need to receive foreign funding to be labelled as foreign agents; anyone can be classified as being under foreign influence, based on a judgment by the authorities. These legislative changes have severely restricted the political opportunities of environmental NGOs, jeopardized their international funding, and disrupted transnational NGO networks. The state authorities, in turn, have sought to co-opt independent NGOs by expanding the network

of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) to legitimize state environmental policies. Nevertheless, the environmental movement has shown the capacity to adapt. While the war has deepened divisions within Russian society, environmental issues remain a concern for citizens and many authorities. However, how these issues are discussed and addressed has changed significantly. In this paper, we explore how environmental NGOs in Russia have navigated the turbulent times. We examine the NGOs' resources and strategies to uncover the movement's transformation in the aftermath of the outbreak of the new phase of the war in Ukraine, and we also investigate the factors that have enabled and impacted the adaptation of the environmental movement in the current societal situation. We pose the following three research questions:

1. How do state discourses of "sovereign ecology" and green patriotism that are mediated through GONGOs redefine the legitimate boundaries of environmental activism?
2. How have environmental NGOs in Russia adapted their strategies in response to the restrictive legislation and the increasingly repressive political climate following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?
3. How have grassroots environmental initiatives in Russia adapted their organizational forms, repertoires of collective action, and public framing strategies in response to wartime repression and the state-led effort to co-opt environmentalisms?

IT IS OUR BROADER AIM to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of civil society in authoritarian contexts and of the adaptive strategies of social movements operating under state pressure.

Theoretical approach: political process, opportunities, and structures

The political process theory, which has been applied to the study of environmental movements over the long term and across various societal contexts, focuses on activists' strategies and the characteristics of the political context in which they operate.⁶ According to the theory, the effectiveness of social movements' actions depends on the political opportunities available to them. Political opportunities refer to the resources and constraints that enable and limit the forms and strategies of social movements in a given social and political context. Political opportunities are regular signals or incentives that either support or hinder the use of resources for the development of social movements by social and political actors.⁷ One of the primary aims of a social movement has been considered to be the mobilization of resources, including participants, funding, or organizational presence. The availability of these resources impacts the forms, strategies, and outcomes of social movements. Access to the resources is de-

“THE STATE’S CRACKDOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY HAS RESULTED IN THE CLOSURE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND THE DISMANTLING OF KEY INFRASTRUCTURES FOR ACTIVISM.”

pendent on the specific political opportunity structures of each society. Governmental regulation is an important element in the political opportunity structures in limiting or enabling the methods of collective action, and it influences the level of conflict and cooperation between various groups of actors. Building on this literature, we advance a conceptual contribution by analyzing not only repression but also the differentiated restructuring of political opportunity structures through co-optation, selective inclusion, and discursive transformation. Rather than treating authoritarian constraint as a uniform condition affecting all environmental actors equally, we conceptualize the environmental field as internally stratified and reshaped by state strategies.

Tarrow⁸ has identified two main strategies employed by political elites on social movements: suppression or exclusion from the political process on the one hand, and assistance or assimilation on the other hand. The exclusion strategy is sometimes accompanied by the creation of state-controlled groups or government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), supported and closely regulated by the state. The assimilation strategy provides wider opportunities for social movements to influence political decision-making. The state's choice of strategy depends on the regime type, with the exclusion strategy more common in authoritarian regimes and the assimilation strategy more typical in democratic political systems.

IN THE RUSSIAN case, however, these strategies may coexist and are applied selectively across different segments of the environmental movement. In this paper, we analyze the emergence and institutional strengthening of GONGOs as a proactive strategy of co-optation, through which the state absorbs and redefines environmental activism in nationalist and sovereign terms. We will show that this process does not merely suppress independent activism; it reorganizes the field by privileging actors that are loyal to the state and redefining the boundaries of legitimate environmental engagement.

Scholars have identified several key trends in the transformation of environmental movements under authoritarian rule. The strengthening of authoritarian tendencies often fosters the rise of environmental populism, where governments instrumentalize environmental issues to achieve wider political objectives.⁹ This is frequently accompanied by symbolic actions by the state to emphasize the importance of environmental issues while simultaneously fostering patriotic sentiments of nature.¹⁰ Consequently, the environment becomes politicized in the way that it is tied to issues of national identity and the strengthening of the national state apparatus. In such situations, state authorities often frame nature as a national asset and focus on protecting native landscapes as well as preserving national territories where certain qualities of nature are deemed to be significant for nation-building¹¹. Governments also tend to sidestep discussions

related to the global environmental agenda and instead emphasize local or national nature-related concerns.

Such politicization of nature in a nationalistic manner has often been accompanied by a rise in nationalist sentiments outside environmental topics, stricter government actions to protect national interests, and the demonization of perceived external and internal threats.¹² In such a discursively nationalistic context, the state has been identified as employing two primary strategies toward environmental NGOs: co-optation of activists and repression of independent organizations.¹³

Existing scholarship has largely interpreted these dynamics through the lens of shrinking civic space and repression.¹⁴ While this perspective remains essential, in this article, we extend it by examining how repression, co-optation, and selective opportunity structures produce differentiated adaptation strategies among two analytically central actor types: (a) independent professional NGOs and (b) grassroots environmental initiatives.

Consequently, independent environmental groups that critique state policies have been marginalized and often only able to operate as informal networks. Furthermore, environmental NGOs have adapted to the authoritarian repression by emphasizing personal interactions with politicians in power and leaders

in administrations rather than public campaigns or mobilizations of citizens. The lobbying that has resulted has been focused on specific issues rather than aiming at general transformations of environmental policies.¹⁵ In authoritarian contexts, informal advocacy, based on behind-the-scenes lobbying and personal connections, has proven an effective strategy for addressing environmental issues.

AS ANOTHER response to state-led nationalistic politicization of nature, patriotic environmentalism has

emerged, with an emphasis on the protection of the native land and assertion of loyalty to the regime.¹⁶ Activists have adopted this rhetoric in Russia to align with state priorities while addressing local environmental concerns.¹⁷ Over time, it has been noted, for example, for Russia, grassroots environmental activism, which focuses on solving local problems and at the same time demonstrates loyalty to the state, has begun to replace professional NGOs that used to seek to influence broader environmental policies. This shift illustrates the ways of adaptation of environmental movements to the structural constraints and opportunities presented by authoritarian governance.

Conceptually, we understand GONGOs as an instrument of state-led co-optation that reorganizes the field of environmentalism. Analytically, we focus on how this intervention by the state reshapes the trajectories, strategies, and organizational forms of independent NGOs and grassroots movements. For analytical clarity, we distinguish between professionalized organizations with policy-oriented ambitions and transnational linkages, and

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locally embedded, issue-specific initiatives characterized by flexible forms of coordination. We assume that these configurations face distinct opportunity structures under wartime authoritarianism and therefore develop different adaptive strategies.

BASED ON OUR empirical data, we explore the transformation of the Russian environmental movement during the wartime period from 2022 to 2024. By 2022, the environmental movement Russia, in a broad sense, consisted of three main types of organizations, each comprising a distinct organizational configuration. We start with the effort of the state to co-opt the environmental movement through propaganda and affiliated GONGOs, which prioritize state-defined environmental agendas. Examples include the Russian Ecological Society, Project Office for Arctic Development (PORA), Ecosystem, and the Russian Popular Front. We then analyse professionalized organizations that combine expertise, transnational linkages, and engagement with policy processes at regional and national levels. Key players within this category include the Russian branches of Greenpeace, WWF, and Bellona. Finally, we examine locally rooted initiatives that emerge around specific environmental issues and combine protest with practical activities such as conservation, clean-up efforts, and environmental education. In our analysis, we focus on the adaptive trajectories of these non-state actors, examining how differentiated political opportunity structures – shaped by repression, co-optation, and nationalist politicization – have reconfigured strategies, organizational forms, and modes of engagement since 2022.

Methodology

Our study is based on a qualitative research design. The empirical material consists of 34 semi-structured interviews with representatives of environmental organizations and initiatives at the national and regional levels. Interviews were conducted in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and various regions of Russia between 2022 and 2025. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for a systematic exploration of the core themes – strategic adaptation, resource constraints, organizational restructuring, and evolving relations with state institutions – while also leaving space for interviewees to elaborate on context-specific experiences. The average duration of the interviews was approximately ninety minutes. To ensure the safety of participants, all interviews were anonymized. Oral consent was received for using the interview data in the research.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a combination of thematic and axial coding.¹⁸ The analysis was informed by social movement theory, particularly approaches that emphasize political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and framing processes. Through coding, the analysis identified key categories related to changes in mobilization strategies, transformations in resource bases, shifts in public positioning, and reconfigurations of environmental organizations and groups' relationships with state actors and broader civil society.

In addition to the interview data, the study draws on publicly



PHOTO: PORA



PHOTO: KREMLINRU

From the top: The Project Office for Arctic Development (PORA), the Russian Ecological Society, and the Russian Popular Front are examples of government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), supported and closely regulated by the state.

available materials, including statements, reports, and posts published on the websites and social media pages of environmental organizations, as well as commentaries on environmental issues in federal and regional media. Publicly available sources are cited by name, whereas interview data are presented in anonymized form. The triangulation of interviews with documentary and media materials strengthens the analytical robustness of the study and provides a broader understanding of how environmental NGOs navigate an increasingly restrictive political environment.

GONGOs: sovereign ecology and green patriotism

Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) represent the politically conservative wing of Russian environmentalism and serve as key intermediaries in the state's effort to co-opt environmentalism as a form of nationalism and a route to societal unity. Rather than functioning as independent civil society actors, these organizations institutionalize a model of environmentalism aligned with regime priorities, national sovereignty, and patriotic consolidation. The largest representatives of such organizations are the umbrella organizations NGO Ecosystem, the Green Age movement, Green Russia, the Russian Ecological Society, and the environmental section of the Popular Front movement. These NGOs have their representatives in various Russian regions. Close collaboration with the state authorities characterizes the activities of the GONGOs, as they actively participate in public councils and the collaborative work of governmental agencies, and they engage in discussions about state environmental programs and environmental assessments. They predominantly support state environmental policies and refrain from criticizing governmental decisions. Rather than aligning themselves with the global environmental agenda, these pro-state environmental GONGOs focus primarily on local environmental issues, such as waste management, air pollution, and forest conservation locally. They organize large-scale demonstration events centered around activities like tree planting, garbage collection, and wildlife preservation. Through these practices, the state reframes environmental protection as a patriotic civic duty embedded in national development rather than as a sphere of independent advocacy or transnational activism. Based on our data, three interrelated ideological trends demonstrate how environmentalism is recast as a pillar of sovereignty, civilizational distinctiveness, and social cohesion.

Sovereign ecology as environmental nationalism. The first pillar of this state-aligned environmentalism is the doctrine of “sovereign ecology,” which subordinates environmental governance to the discourse of national sovereignty and civilizational autonomy. In the Russian case, sovereign ecology must be situated within a much broader sovereignty-centred state-led discourse that permeates political, legal, and cultural spheres.¹⁹ The language of sovereignty operates as a unifying trope across state rhetoric, reinforcing claims to autonomy from external influence. Within this wider discursive campaign, environmental

governance is framed in terms of national security and protection of the nation's environmental interests, while international environmental organizations are cast as vehicles of foreign normative intrusion. For these organizations, global environmental issues are viewed as drivers for promoting principles of democracy and liberal values that are seen as threats to conservative values in Russia or as tools for competition between states. Representing such a position, the politician and diplomat Boris Gryzlov, in his policy article *On the Environmental Sovereignty of Russia*, outlines the key objectives of the platform for sovereign ecology, emphasizing the importance of ensuring environmental sovereignty, enhancing environmental safety, and engaging citizens and organizations in environmental initiatives. Gryzlov states:

The main goals of the entire platform should be to ensure a new level of environmental sovereignty of the Russian Federation, to support the implementation of a set of measures to ensure the country's environmental safety, and to involve a wide range of our citizens and civic organisations in the implementation of environmental projects and initiatives. In addition, the successful developments of the platform can become the basis for interaction with our foreign like-minded people, and the platform itself can become a new center for international environmental cooperation.²⁰

The GONGO Russian Ecological Society contributes to the development of these ideas, and it emphasizes the goal of strengthening national identity through environmental activities. It promotes the strategy of distancing from international NGOs, criticizing their activities, and getting into open conflict with them. Thus, the Russian Ecological Society initiated inspections by the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian branch of Greenpeace, which subsequently contributed to the recognition of Greenpeace as an undesirable organization and hence its closure. Russian Ecological Society states on its web-page on sovereignty:

At the present stage of civilizational changes, one of the most important directions in the development of Russian society may be the formation of the concept of a sovereign attitude towards nature through the philosophy of the structure of Russian society within it. At the same time, the basic condition for achieving the goals of Russia's environmental well-being should be the use of exclusively national resources [...] At the same time, national actors and public opinion leaders should preach the philosophy of strengthening the Russian identity in the environmental sphere.²¹

In this framing, environmentalism becomes an instrument for reinforcing political autonomy and delineating civilizational boundaries, transforming ecological protection into a domain of national self-assertion.

Ecological mission and civilizational distinctiveness. A second trend reframes Russia's vast natural resources as evidence of a distinct civilizational mission, positioning the country as a unique civilizational actor and further embedding environmental discourse within nationalist narratives. This presents Russia as an environmental donor and emphasizes the nation's role in conserving biodiversity and providing green technologies to address global environmental challenges. On a top political level, President Putin has highlighted Russia's vast natural resource potential and its contribution to the sustainability of the biosphere:

I would like to emphasize that Russia's gigantic, indeed gigantic, natural resource potential certainly has planetary significance. Our country has colossal reserves of fresh water, forest resources, and enormous biodiversity, and it acts as an environmental donor to the world, providing it with almost 10% of the biosphere's sustainability.²²

Despite the geopolitical crisis and reduced attention to global environmental problems, Russian pro-government actors continue to promote the idea of Russia as a global environmental donor. This reinforces the idea of the country's special mission in the world and sets it apart from Western countries. This perspective also highlights the responsibility that Russia is argued to bear for the ecological well-being of the entire planet, as is stated in this extract:

We have an agenda where we need something and where we can already export our ideas and our technologies, and here we have advantages. Russia is an environmental donor for the entire planet; everyone recognizes this, but many people don't like it. This means that we are responsible for the ecology of the entire planet; we bear this responsibility.²³

By portraying Russia as both indispensable and uniquely responsible for planetary stability, this environmental discourse strengthens narratives of national grandeur and moral authority that are used for the purposes of supporting the arguments for strong state intervention in environmental governance.

Green patriotism and societal consolidation. The third pillar directly links environmental activism with patriotic education, positioning ecological engagement as a vehicle for social unity and regime alignment. Russian GONGOs have actively developed ecological-patriotic education that merges environmental issues with patriotic sentiment. The concept of green patriotism can be dated to have emerged in 2016, when representatives of the

environmental movement Green Age proposed it. In 2016, the Green Age, Green Russia, and Cedar movements signed a patriotic pact, in which the basic principles of green patriotism were announced:

Russia is the largest country in the world. And no one can impose someone else's will on us. The strength of Russia lies in the strength of its people. Loving nature and loving the Motherland are inseparable concepts for us... Healthy values of environmental patriotism allow us to ensure a balance between the biosphere and the Technosphere, between the use of natural resources for the effective socio-economic development of Russian territories and environmental protection.²⁴

These principles emphasize the inseparable connection between loving nature and loving the Motherland, aiming to strike a balance between the biosphere and the technosphere while ensuring environmental protection for the effective socio-economic development of Russian territories. At the same time, opposition to Western values and Western environmentalism is emphasized:

We propose the idea of 'green' patriotism as basic in environmental protection. The interests of the country must be paramount. And our task, as patriotic ecologists, is to ensure that development occurs with minimal damage to nature... It is necessary to resist the Western approach to ecology, which is based on pillars such as postmodernism, anti-globalism, radical feminism, green anarchism, and anti-clericalism.²⁵

Since 2022, there has been a significant push to foster patriotism through a connection to native nature, particularly within youth environmental movements. The pro-government youth environmental movement Ecosystem has

outlined its main goals to be cultivating environmentally patriotic thinking and promoting patriotic eco-activists²⁶. Discussions around green patriotism also stress the importance of aligning societal identity with the authorities and establishing a unified platform. Protest-based environmental activism is often portrayed in a negative light, and environmental activists who adopt oppositional stances to the state have been labelled as "marginal environmentalists".²⁷ Overall, environmental GONGOs associated with green patriotism mainly work to legitimize the national government's environmental policies, and they focus on creating demonstrable effects on the environment rather than driving institutional changes. In this model, environmentalism becomes a mechanism of depoliticization and fortification of a model

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ISSUES WITH PATRIOTIC
SENTIMENT.”**

in which state-led programs replace voluntary civic action. It channels civic participation into regime-approved activities, legitimizes state policy, and aims to substitute demonstrative environmental civil society action that might be critical of institutional structures.

TAKEN TOGETHER, these three trends – sovereign ecology, ecological mission, and green patriotism – illustrate how environmentalism in contemporary Russia is strategically reframed as a nationalist project by actors that are aligned with the state policies as well as an instrument that claims to advance societal unity, at the same time silencing any critical voices. Viewed analytically, this configuration can be understood as a systematic effort by the state to co-opt the environmental movement: by institutionalizing loyalist organizations, redefining environmental priorities in sovereign and civilizational terms, and delegitimizing oppositional activism, the authorities absorb ecological mobilization into regime-supporting structures. Rather than fostering autonomous civil society, pro-government environmental organizations embed ecological discourse within state-centered narratives of sovereignty, civilizational responsibility, and patriotic cohesion, thereby transforming environmental engagement from a potential site of contention into a mechanism of political consolidation and normative alignment with the state.

While pro-government GONGOs demonstrate how environmentalism has been incorporated into state-centered narratives and mobilized as an instrument of nationalist consolidation, this dynamic does not exhaust the field of environmental activism in Russia. In the next section we turn to the adaptations of independent environmental NGOs during the war, and examine how actors outside regime-aligned structures respond to intensified political constraints, navigate risks of repression, and renegotiate their strategies in a context where environmental engagement has been subjected to increasing securitization and politicization by the state.

Adaptations of independent environmental NGOs during the war

The developments observed after February 2022 largely represent an intensification, formalization, and narrowing of adaptive strategies that predated the war, rather than entirely new patterns. However, the scale of repression, the designation of major NGOs as undesirable organizations, and the geopolitical tensions have significantly transformed the institutional environment in which these long-standing strategies operate. Overall, many environmental NGOs have been added to the list of foreign agents, but some NGOs have also been removed from the registry.²⁸ The reasons for the removals have been related, for example, to the NGOs' usefulness to the state administration. In 2022, several different environmental NGOs were designated as foreign agents.

The reasons for the inclusion of these organizations on the register remain unclear. Informants report that they were not provided with formal explanations and do not know the specific grounds for the designation as a foreign agent. It has been speculated, however, that factors for the inclusion on the register may have included anti-war statements, participation in rallies following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or alleged foreign funding.²⁹ The following year, three additional environmental NGOs were added to the register of foreign agents: WWF Russia; Omsk Civil Association, which was involved in the efforts to prevent deforestation; and Kedr-Media, which provided the public with information about the environmental conditions in Russia. Furthermore, in 2023, five international NGOs were listed as undesirable in Russia. Among them was the Norwegian environmental foundation Bellona, which was accused of undermining the Russian economy, discrediting governmental policies, and destabilizing the socio-political situation in Russia. Greenpeace International and WWF International were also added to the list. The Russian branch of

WWF was forced to break relationships with WWF International, abandon the panda logo, cut staff, and reduce operations to a minimum. A limited number of former WWF staff formed a new NGO, Nature and People. Greenpeace Russia closed its operations, and the members formed a new NGO, Earth Concerns Everyone. The two most recent NGOs declared undesirable were the Altai Project, which had focused on efforts to

“EVEN BEFORE RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE, MANY ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS IN RUSSIA PRACTICED SELECTIVE DEPOLITICIZATION.”

preserve wildlife and opposed the construction of the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline and the development of the Kara-Kul cobalt deposit in the Altai Republic, as well as the Russian branch of the U.S. NGO Wild Salmon Center. All of these actions on the NGOs significantly impacted the Russian environmental movement in the regions, as international NGOs had, since the 1990s, provided significant financial and expert support to regional groups. In this situation, the NGOs have adjusted their strategies.³⁰ The following seven strategies can be identified in our data.

Avoiding geopolitical statements: Continuity and intensification after February 2022. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many environmental NGOs in Russia practiced selective depoliticization. Organizations frequently framed their work in technocratic and conservation-oriented terms, avoided direct criticism of federal authorities, and relied on informal accommodation with the state. Self-censorship had already become a routine survival strategy. After February 2022, this pre-existing strategy intensified and became more explicit. Several NGOs adopted formal internal decisions to avoid any geopolitical positioning. A representative of WWF Russia explained that following Russia's invasion of Ukraine,

It was immediately decided that we would not make any statements. Our position is that we are outside of

politics, our goal is to preserve nature, and we do not make political statements.³¹

NGOs have now resorted to discreet conversations and implicit agreements with governmental authorities instead of engaging in public discussions. This shift is due to self-censorship and the challenges posed by the ongoing war.

Such self-censorship has been a typical behavior for many NGOs operating in Russia. However, this strategy has not helped the WWF and Greenpeace to avoid being labeled as undesirable organizations. For many other NGOs, however, self-censorship and distancing from politics have worked out. Some NGOs have engaged in environmental issues considered to be less sensitive.

Fluctuating interactions with the state: From institutionalized cooperation to fragmented contact. Before the war, large environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF maintained institutionalized cooperation with federal and regional authorities. They provided expert input for Russia's participation in international environmental conventions, participated in public councils, contributed to drafting environmental legislation, and collaborated with the Ministry of Natural Resources. In the first months after the invasion, this cooperation continued, demonstrating institutional inertia and the state's reliance on NGO expertise. However, being listed as a foreign agent affected other environmental NGOs' expert work in several public councils under the state agencies:

Since 2022, we have not been able to participate in public council meetings; however, our communication has not been restricted, and we have continued engaging with officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources at various public events.³²

Following the recognition of Greenpeace and WWF as undesirable organizations, institutional cooperation largely ceased. Interaction with state agencies became individualized and informal, involving former NGO employees acting as private experts rather than representatives of independent organizations. At the same time, issue-specific collaboration occasionally re-emerged. The December 2024 Black Sea oil spill revived temporary cooperation between authorities and environmental actors. Environmental Watch of North Caucasus coordinated volunteers alongside local authorities, while Earth Concerns Everyone – formed by former Greenpeace experts – partnered with state agencies to mitigate environmental damage. As one activist observed:

Interestingly, government structures are reacting without resorting to repression against NGO and citizen self-organization.³³

Moreover, by leveraging social connections and existing social capital, individual environmental NGOs and their activists have continued partnerships with the state. Previously established connections with regional authorities have enabled an NGO des-



In 2022, several different environmental NGOs were designated as foreign agents, including an Arkhangelsk-based unregistered group.



PHOTO: SAKHALIN ENVIRONMENT WATCH

The reknown Sakhalin Environmental Watch was also among the NGOs forced to shut down in 2022. The photo shows pink salmon killed by poachers in Sakhalin's Lazovaya River.



An oil refinery waste landfill that the activists in Sakhalin Environmental Watch were fighting against for several years.

ignated as a foreign agent to continue operating in a particular region and even get its foreign agent status removed. One NGO expert revealed that:

Our work has always focused on specially protected areas; even after being designated as foreign agents, we remained active in public councils and continued to be respected by state agencies.³⁴

NGOs operating informally: From supplementary practice to core survival strategy. In the post-February 2022 period, after closures of NGOs and foreign agent designations intensified, some activists chose not to establish new legal entities. They have preferred to continue their environmental work as non-registered groups. While forgoing official legal recognition limits the environmental groups' areas of operation and funding opportunities, it has allowed the groups to evade close governmental scrutiny. Acting as private individuals, the activists have relied on informal networks and personal connections with other environmental NGOs and governmental agencies. Many of the activists have a reputation as highly qualified environmental experts, which has helped them to continue personal environmental activism after the closure of their organizations. The reliance on informal interactions is reminiscent of the Soviet era, during which individuals had to cultivate personal connections to navigate the societal and political system. There has also been demand for informal interaction mechanisms that allow one to bypass increased governmental pressure and maintain some ties with the international environmental community. Nevertheless, informalization has not always guaranteed protection from state intervention.

Forming new alliances. In 2023, the Reserve Alliance (Zapovednyi Al'ians) was formed to fight the destruction of specially protected areas. It consists of 48 environmental NGOs that monitor the observance of nature conservation legislation in specially protected areas, including the related natural, historical, and cultural aspects within the protected areas. They issue petitions to legislators, once even to the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, concerning the illegal clear-cutting of forests in the planned Masayesva nature reserve in the Republic of Karelia. This alliance has therefore been formed for this specific task of supporting conservation in a planned conservation area.

Operating under a different name. Pre-February 2022 re-registration and organizational restructuring occurred periodically but were not widespread survival strategies. After forced closures, rebranding became a systematic adaptation. A few members of the Russian branch of Greenpeace formed an orga-

nization called The Earth Concerns Everyone, which focuses on promoting environmentally friendly lifestyles, contesting unnecessary private consumption, and advocating for recycling. Additionally, its experts work to advance environmental legislation related to nature conservation and the safety of oil production. Meanwhile, several individuals from WWF Russia established a new NGO called Nature and People to continue their critical work. Their activities include participating in public councils, promoting environmental education, advocating for the protection of natural areas through petitions, and conducting research. In 2023, Kedr-Media, an organization that analyzed the environmental impact of the war and distributed information provided by foreign agents, was designated a foreign agent itself. To protect its journalists from escalating threats, Kedr-Media officially closed in January 2024. Shortly after, a new entity named Smola-Media emerged, successfully publishing environmental news while avoiding politically sensitive topics. However, Smola-Media was also labelled a foreign agent. Following this, the organization resumed operations under its original name, Kedr Media.

Another NGO representative explains that the new naming has also been linked with fundraising from the state:

We created a new entity to engage in state-sponsored projects. Funding is small, we have fewer staff, those who learned to write grants can get grants from the state, and we are getting them.³⁵

“IN 2022, NINE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS WERE CONVICTED, SEVEN OF WHOM RECEIVED PRISON SENTENCES RANGING FROM TWO TO FIVE YEARS.”

Defending the rights of environmental activists and NGOs. Recognizing the increased governmental repression, when the war started, an Environmental Crisis Group was formed. It has been dedicated to publicizing information about the persecution of environmental activists and providing help to them. They collect money to finance the

services of lawyers, participate in lawsuits, and organize letters to those who are in prison, driven by the belief that resistance is not futile and that some activists have been able to successfully defend themselves and their rights:

In our publications and on our Telegram channel, we highlight not only cases of environmentalists facing prosecution, but also success stories. In some instances, local protests have been effective – for example, in protecting local forests.³⁶

Involvement on a global scale resumed from exile. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian environmental NGOs participated actively in international networks, conventions, and transnational campaigns. After the invasion, institutional participation declined sharply. Partnerships with US and European organizations were disrupted by boycotts, and a 2023 Rus-

sian law restricted cooperation with NGOs from “unfriendly” countries.

However, global engagement resumed in exile-based formats. Interactions between international environmental NGOs and activists in exile have increased, relying on social connections and social capital cultivated in the past. In certain cases, exiled environmentalists have shifted their attention to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Before the war, Eco-Defense, a prominent organization with members scattered across the EU, campaigned against environmentally harmful projects in Russia. In 2022–2023, however, it collaborated with German environmental NGOs to monitor compliance with EU sanctions on companies engaging in illegal trade with Russia. Through their expertise in supply chain analysis, Eco-Defense has identified companies in Germany that violate sanctions by trading with Russia, and they have shared this information with the members of the European Parliament to prompt action. Additionally, the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group, consisting of activists in exile from Russia and Ukrainian experts, has been focused on assessing the war’s impacts on ecosystems, soil, the destroyed Kakhovka dam, and Mazut pollution at the Black Sea. In many cases, exiled and Russian activists cooperate in writing global assessment reports. In sum, after February 2022, international engagement did not disappear but was reconfigured: from institutionally embedded cross-border cooperation to exile-driven, war-related, and sanction-focused transnational activism.

Grassroots environmental movement: traditionalism and concerns of social injustice

Grassroots activism emerges locally and is organized without the involvement of large NGOs or GONGOs. Led by leading figures, they are not as much based on environmental expertise as typical NGOs, but originate in the concerns that individual persons have about specific problems that they see in their daily physical environments. The grassroots environmental movement in Russia can be divided into two main branches: first, volunteer projects and initiatives, and second, environmental protests related to the protection of natural areas. The grassroots protest movement on natural areas was actively developing until 2022. Between 2018 and 2021, a wave of environmental protests swept across the Russian regions, driven by concerns over the protection of natural areas and opposition to landfill constructions. The best-known protests took place in the Republic of Bashkiria in defense of the Kushtau Shikhan (2019–2020), in the Arkhangelsk Region against the construction of a landfill at Shies station (2019–2021), and in the Moscow Region in defense of the Trinity Forest (2019–2021). In the wake of these protests, several sustainability movements emerged, continuing to monitor environmental issues in their respective regions even after the demonstrations ended. Similarly, before the post-2022 phase of the war, projects related to waste collection and recycling were actively developing. In 2021, the Eco-Volunteer Union was established, bringing together volunteer-based initiatives from across Russia, such as No More Trash, Separate Waste Collection, RusEco (As-

sembly), Environmental Volunteer Projects, and many others. These initiatives, along with their joint activities, continued to develop throughout 2022–2024, supported by state grants, businesses, volunteers, and citizen donations.

At the level of rhetoric and organizational logic, however, the mobilization of these initiatives increasingly echoed late Soviet idioms of collective duty and vigilance. The framing of environmental protection as a civic service, aligned with state priorities, is reminiscent of the *druzhiny* movement and other Soviet-era forms of voluntary activism. Situating this development within longer continuities dating back to Soviet environmentalist discourse³⁷ helps contextualize contemporary grassroots activism not as an entirely new phenomenon but as a reactivation and adaptation of re-established repertoires of coordinated public engagement, shaped through and based on earlier ideas, practices, and interactions between the governing state institutions and civic actors.

GENERALLY, THERE ARE very few interactions between large expert-based NGOs and grassroots activism. When the Black Sea Mazut spill from sunken tankers occurred in December 2024, over 10,000 volunteers rushed to rescue seabirds and clean up the shoreline. By January 2025, the efforts had become highly organized, with sponsorship from multiple businesses, NGO fundraising campaigns, and oversight from state agencies. These initiatives, compared to expert NGOs, are mostly apolitical in the sense that they do not challenge state environmental policy or any other state policies more broadly. In an online discussion, the difference between organizations was stated:

However, there is a noticeable gap between traditional environmental organizations, which focus on strategic long-term efforts, and activist groups that tend to respond to high-profile events such as the Black Sea disaster.³⁸

After February 2022, grassroots environmental protests and initiatives initially came to a standstill due to the shock of the ongoing events. In 2022, nine environmental activists were convicted, seven of whom received prison sentences ranging from two to five years.³⁹ By comparison, in 2020, two environmental activists received suspended sentences, while in 2021, eight activists were sentenced, three of whom received actual prison terms.⁴⁰ Throughout 2024, 95 cases of state pressure were documented against 72 eco-activists, 15 initiative groups, and five environmental organizations across 27 regions. In 2023, more than 174 eco-activists and 29 environmental associations faced persecution in Russia. Three organizations were designated as foreign agents, five were declared “undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation,” and two were dissolved by court order.⁴¹ However, activism soon resumed, albeit on a smaller scale, largely due to persistent repression. Generally, after 2022, environmental volunteering has continued, as one of the grassroots leaders said:

Green activism continues despite all the madness that is happening around.⁴²

The decline in public participation in environmental protests can be attributed to repressive state laws that restrict activism and suppress criticism of governmental policies. At the same time, the state has generally responded to environmental protests more leniently than to other forms of dissent, provided they remain apolitical in the sense that they do not criticize the established power structures of the state apparatus. However, environmental activists who have engaged in anti-war actions have faced administrative charges and fines⁴³. Those who publicly opposed the war became direct targets of repression, leading to a rise in criminal cases and administrative arrests. These punitive measures primarily affected environmental activists who adopted an anti-war stance.

Despite the repression, there have been public grassroots protests. Some of the most prominent protests since 2022 have focused on oil production and river pollution in the Komi Republic, deforestation in the Trinity Forest near Moscow, gold mining in Bashkiria, logging in the Chelyabinsk region and the Republic of Karelia, as well as air pollution in the Krasnoyarsk Krai in Siberia and Primorskiy Krai in the Far East. Regional environmental activists often have held divergent views of the war, which has led to internal divisions within the grassroots environmental movement. Additionally, the intensifying state crackdown on social activists has contributed to a partial transformation of grassroots environmental protests. In 2023, rallies largely ceased to be a viable form of collective action because obtaining official permissions became virtually impossible. Instead, activists shifted toward organizing alternative events, such as forums, conferences, walks, indoor meetings, and concerts, to draw the authorities' attention to environmental issues. One of the most commonly used strategies became filing complaints and appeals to government bodies, although environmental activists themselves often expressed skepticism about their effectiveness. Currently, grassroots environmental activism is diverse in Russia. On the basis of our data, we distinguish four current key trends in grassroots environmental activism in Russia, and we present these trends below.

Nature “for oneself” and a shift from global agendas to local concerns. Grassroots concerns about environmental issues are closely tied to perceptions of social injustice and the unfair distribution of resources between regional residents, companies, and Moscow. This connection represents the most common and deeply rooted understanding of the environmental agenda at the grassroots level. For residents, natural spaces hold significant social value as they serve as favorite vacation spots, form the basis for traditional activities, carry religious importance, and provide support for families. During environmental protests, demands primarily focus on tangible issues that directly affect residents,

such as air pollution, deforestation, and landfills. The seizure of natural areas for industrial projects is largely perceived as harmful to the community. A key source of public outrage is that the income generated from natural resource extraction in the regions flows to the federal center or private companies, while residents bear the brunt of the negative consequences. Furthermore, residents express dissatisfaction with being excluded from decision-making processes concerning their localities.

During many protests, residents have emphasized the imbalance between Moscow and the regions and the lack of concern for regional environmental issues by Moscow and the federal center of power. However, these social grievances against Moscow have not translated into political dissatisfaction with the federal center of power, and the blame for these problems has mostly been placed on regional authorities and companies.

Activists have stated the imbalance between the center and the regions:

“They exploit Russia but build castles in Europe!”⁴⁴ “The Russian metropolis, exploiting its colony, prioritizes its own enrichment at the expense of the health of the colonized people, their traditions, and their unique nature. The problem of oil spills in Komi has persisted for over 30 years, yet neither oil companies nor the authorities make any effort to address it.”⁴⁵ “The residents of the area are in a dire situation. They

have nothing left to lose. Everything is already terrible to them: no bridge, no proper roads, no water supply, no electricity, no public transport, and the medical facilities only operate once a week.”⁴⁶

Before 2022, demands related to global environmental issues, such as biodiversity conservation and climate change, were occasionally voiced by representatives of environmental organizations during protests. However, after 2022, grassroots environmental movements in Russia largely ceased to articulate demands tied to the global environmental agenda. This shift suggests that grassroots environmental mobilization in the Russian regions operates primarily under the principle of “nature for oneself” or “nature for the community”, aligning more closely with materialistic and conservative values rather than broader global environmental concerns.

Depoliticization and conservative trends in Russia’s grassroots environmental movement post-2022. Increasing state repression against activists has contributed to the depoliticization of environmental protests. Until 2022, in many cases, environmental demands were transformed into political ones, often linked to calls for the resignation of regional leaders. Examples include the movement for the Khimki Forest, protests against a landfill in the Arkhangelsk region, demonstrations in defense of

“AFTER 2022, GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN RUSSIA LARGELY CEASED TO ARTICULATE DEMANDS TIED TO THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA.”

Shikhans in Bashkiria, and the For a Clean Sky movement in the Krasnoyarsk Krai. However, after 2022, environmental protests have largely become apolitical. Grassroots activists advocating for the preservation of natural areas now emphasize that they do not oppose the authorities, but instead, seek the state's assistance. As one activist noted:

As long as people protest without touching political topics, they have a chance to be heard.⁴⁷

Similarly, an expert observed:

The anti-war agenda is immediately stifled in the bud; you can speak out on all sorts of other topics if you don't have anti-war rhetoric. This is a big condition. At the same time, people from the regions do not have anti-war views. At first, they argued about it in the mailing lists, but then they stopped. The war is not discussed. In a lot of regional chats, I know that they support it.⁴⁸

Use of traditional and conservative rhetoric. Grassroots environmental activists effectively employ conservative rhetoric to advance their goals and demonstrate loyalty to the authorities. This is reflected in their appeals to traditional values, the historical heritage of their regions, and the preservation of national culture⁴⁹. By leveraging traditionalist rhetoric and aligning their causes with national identity, grassroots environmental activists navigate political constraints. A recurring theme in these appeals is the preservation of ancestral land, with environmental protection often framed as a duty to safeguard the land of one's forebears. Activists frequently present environmental threats as existential threats to the national culture, traditional ways of life, and religious or historical sites. Natural landmarks are imbued with historical significance and serve as national symbols. The memory of the region's glorious past and key historical events is actively used to mobilize local populations. For example, the anti-nickel movement on the Khopr River invoked patriotic sentiments with the slogan: "*This is the heart of Russia, and it is not for sale!*"⁵⁰. Similarly, an activist from the Shies protest in the Arkhangelsk region emphasized the connection between environmental protection and survival, stating:

We stood up for ourselves on our land. Most of us are willing to give our lives to prevent the destruction of the environment that exists here. The northern forest [...] People hunt and collect mushrooms in these forests, which are a source of food for them.⁵¹

Symbolic actions play a crucial role in reinforcing this narrative. Protesters often install memorial crosses, conduct religious rituals, and use historical symbols to frame their cause within a broader cultural and spiritual context. This strategy is also evident in activist-organized events. One informant described efforts to align environmental protests with conservative cultural values:

We held rallies, brought in Old Believers and people from these villages – about 40 people in total – and organized a musical and poetic marathon so that I wouldn't be accused of rocking the boat.⁵²

The militarization of grassroots activism. In certain cases, the militarization of the environmental agenda has been observed, as environmental protection has become increasingly intertwined with military defense of the nation. This trend has been exemplified by the revival of the Soviet-era slogan "To protect nature means to protect the Motherland".⁵³ In some regions, environmental mobilization incorporated rhetoric linked to the memory of World War II, portraying industrial companies as occupiers. For example, during a rally in Vladivostok against tree cutting, a resolution was read aloud to the accompaniment of the song *Holy War*, invoking the heroic deeds of past generations in liberating the land from invaders and emphasizing that contemporary activists, too, could achieve victory.⁵⁴

This militarization of grassroots environmental activism is further reflected in the adoption of specific strategies, including involving militarized actors in environmental protection efforts, framing environmental campaigns within military narratives, promoting eco-patriotic education, mobilizing eco-activist resources to support the military, and disseminating militaristic rhetoric within environmental movements. One example is the "Helping Nature and the Army" campaign, which has been ongoing in one district for nearly two years. The initiative involves collecting plastic bottle caps for recycling, with all proceeds directly allocated to soldiers participating in the special military operation to purchase military gear, equipment, and various supplies.⁵⁵

Militaristic rhetoric is also evident in public statements made by local activists. For instance, the VK group of local initiative declared: "The residents will defend Russian lands on the home front until victory during the special military operation!"⁵⁶. Historical narratives have also been invoked to justify environmental preservation within a militarized context. One informant recalled:

During World War II, during the Battle of Stalingrad, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin established green belts around Sverdlovsk as the lungs of the city, so that engineers and workers in defense enterprises could breathe, strengthening the city's defense capability – where metal is forged and where the metal of victory is forged.⁵⁷ [liv]

Additionally, some grassroots environmental activists have suggested that participants in the special military operation could emerge as a new, socially significant force capable of influencing government decisions. In certain protests, environmental activists have explicitly appealed for support from their compatriots engaged in the war effort. Overall, the grassroots environmental movement in Russia has adapted to the changing political landscape by integrating itself into conservative discourse and refraining from overtly political statements.

Discussion

The reflections of the war in Ukraine have significantly reshaped the environmental movement in Russia, and these changes align with broader trends observed in authoritarian societies where environmental issues are politicized and instrumentalized to serve wider state objectives. From the perspective of political process theory, the war has fundamentally altered the political opportunity structure by narrowing access to institutional channels, criminalizing certain forms of transnational cooperation, and redefining the boundaries of legitimate environmental action. This conflict between the environmental movement and the state has led to a decline in the prominence of the environmental agenda, the relocation of activists abroad, and the closure of international environmental organizations, thereby weakening the social and financial infrastructures of environmental activism in Russia. However, the environmental movement has demonstrated a capacity for adaptation, confirming the theoretical expectation that social movements recalibrate their strategies in response to shifts in opportunity structures rather than disappearing entirely. According to the research presented in this paper, four types of current environmental activism in today's Russia can be identified.

Adaptation to authoritarian constraints. The war has forced environmental activists to navigate a political

landscape characterized by intensified nationalist discourse and distrust of international environmental organizations. In terms of political process theory, this represents a contraction of external political opportunities combined with selective opening for regime-aligned actors. This development aligns with environmental populism, where the state recodes nature as a national asset to foster patriotic sentiment and sidestep the global environmental agenda.⁵⁸ In Russia, this has manifested in increased emphasis on protecting native land and framing environmental issues as matters of national security.

Independent environmental NGOs have faced significant structural constraints under these conditions. The introduction of restrictive legislation and the loss of opportunities to collaborate with international partners have forced them to revise their strategies. Many have shifted away from public mobilization toward lower-visibility forms of engagement, relying on personal networks, expert work, and informal channels of communication with authorities to address specific environmental issues⁵⁹. Theoretically, this illustrates a transition from contentious to contained action, consistent with scholarship showing that under authoritarian conditions, movements often survive by reducing visibility, narrowing issue framing, and avoiding direct confrontation. At the same time, independent organizations that previously shaped regional environmental agendas have gradually exited the public arena, indicating not only adaptation but also a contraction of professionalized advocacy within the move-

ment. In contrast, pro-government environmental organizations have capitalized on the state-promoted narrative. Deploying environmental rhetoric, they legitimize state policies and promote forms of “green patriotism.” This dynamic exemplifies Tarrow’s assimilation strategy in an authoritarian setting: rather than expanding pluralistic participation, assimilation operates through controlled inclusion and the construction of GONGOs as mechanisms of co-optation.

The rise of patriotic environmentalism. The war has accelerated the rise of patriotic environmentalism, where activists adopt state-aligned rhetoric to demonstrate loyalty while addressing local concerns.⁶⁰ This trend can be interpreted as a discursive adaptation to the nationalist politicization of nature: by reframing environmental protection as service to the Motherland, activists align their claims with dominant regime narratives and thereby secure limited operational space.

This is particularly visible in grassroots initiatives that focus on practical activities – plastic recycling, garbage collection, landscaping – while avoiding sensitive issues such as nuclear energy or forest governance. From a theoretical standpoint, grassroots activism occupies a distinct niche within the reconfigured opportunity structure: it benefits from relative tolerance when framed as apolitical and community-oriented,

yet remains structurally excluded from influencing macro-level environmental policy. By aligning with state priorities and refraining from political critique, these groups ensure organizational survival but limit their transformative capacity.

Polarization and hybrid activism. The Russian environmental movement has become increasingly polarized. Pro-state organizations embrace nationalist and sovereign ecology narratives, while independent NGOs and many grassroots actors distance themselves from overt political engagement. This polarization reflects the consequences of the dual strategy by the state to deal with civic activism and protests identified in the theoretical framework: there is simultaneous co-optation of the environmental agenda for purposes that would legitimize the goals of the state; and repression of the civil society to tame environmental activism and harness it to the support of the goals of the state.⁶¹ Pro-government NGOs receive institutional support and symbolic recognition, whereas independent organizations are marginalized, forced into informal operation, or dissolved.

At the same time, a hybrid form of activism has emerged, characterized by selective collaboration between NGOs and state actors. Theoretically, this hybridization demonstrates that political opportunity structures under authoritarianism are not uniformly closed; rather, they are selectively permeable, enabling negotiated forms of participation in the environmental arena that nevertheless fall short of autonomous civil society engage-

“THE REFLECTIONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY RESHAPED THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA.”

ment. Informal channels – such as connections with relocated activists or residual international contacts – remain important for sustaining transnational ties. Yet these interactions are frequently reframed to emphasize Russia's role in maintaining global ecological balance or advancing green technologies, thereby aligning even outward-facing initiatives with state-centered narratives.

Overall, the wartime transformation of Russian environmental activism illustrates a differentiated reconfiguration of the movements: GONGOs institutionalize co-optation; independent NGOs recalibrate their activities through contained and informal strategies; and grassroots initiatives adapt by localizing and depoliticizing their agendas. Engaging political process theory thus allows us to interpret these developments not merely as repression-induced decline but as a systemic restructuring of opportunities, identities, and repertoires of action under conditions of authoritarian consolidation of state-controlled society.

Conclusions

Based on the findings presented in this paper, we can draw broader conclusions about the relationship between political opportunity structures and environmental activism in Russia and, more generally, in authoritarian settings. Political process theory helps illuminate how shifts in state priorities, regulatory regimes, and access by civil society actors to institutional arenas affect the configuration of environmental activism.⁶² At the same time, the Russian case demonstrates that opportunity structures under authoritarianism are not merely restrictive but are actively engineered through varying degrees of state repression of the environmental activists, state's co-optation of the environmental agenda, and selective inclusion.

We have shown that wartime authoritarian consolidation does not simply reduce civic space in quantitative terms; it qualitatively reorganizes the hierarchy of actors within the environmental field. Rather than producing uniform contraction, it generates differentiated trajectories across actor types. The consequences of the war – legal restrictions, reputational risks, and the severing of transnational ties – have disproportionately affected professionalized independent NGOs, undermining their financial bases, expertise networks, and policy leverage. As a result, actors that previously contributed to environmental agenda-setting at regional and federal levels have experienced a marked decline in visibility and influence.

By contrast, organizations aligned with official state priorities have secured institutional continuity and public presence. Through the expansion of GONGOs and sovereignty-centred discourses, the state has not only protected loyalist actors but also redefined the boundaries of legitimate environmental engagement. The prominence of GONGOs signals a redefinition of what counts as legitimate environmental engagement, privileging activities compatible with state narratives and sidelining advocacy framed in universalist or transnational terms.

Independent NGOs have not disappeared but have recalibrated their modes of operation. Their current strategies are characterized less by public campaigning and more by issue-specific

interventions, risk minimization, and selective engagement with authorities. This shift reflects strategic adaptation within a narrowed opportunity structure rather than depoliticization driven by discourse alone; state repression remains the primary constraining force. This adjustment reflects constrained but ongoing independent NGOs' participation in environmental matters rather than complete exclusion from environmental advocacy.

Grassroots initiatives occupy a distinct position. Their focus on localized environmental problems has allowed them to maintain operational capacity, particularly when framed in non-confrontational terms in relation to state policy. However, this localization has also contributed to a fragmentation of the broader environmental agenda, reducing the likelihood of coordinated, large-scale environmental policy influence. At the same time, grassroots activism demonstrates greater organizational flexibility, oscillating between pragmatic accommodation and latent resistance depending on local political conditions.

Taken together, these developments suggest that under intensified authoritarian conditions, environmental activism persists but in a reconfigured form. The Russian case highlights how state power reshapes the internal balance of the movement and redistributes visibility, resources, and strategic horizons across different actor types. State repression contracts the space for contentious politics, while co-optation and GONGO expansion reorganize the field from within. While environmental engagement remains present at multiple levels, its capacity to shape structural environmental policy has narrowed, and its public articulation has become increasingly circumscribed by political context.

More broadly, this study underscores that in authoritarian systems, political opportunity structures function as dynamic instruments through which regimes recalibrate civic participation – constraining some actors, privileging others, and redefining the scope of collective action. Authoritarian governance thus does not eliminate environmental mobilization; it selectively restructures it, producing internal differentiation and strategic divergence rather than uniform suppression. ✖

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Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Kone Foundation grant no. 202005986 Diversities of the Environmental Movement in Russia.

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Ecoactivists in Russia supporting Fridays for Future (before 2022).

PHOTO: RECYCLE/KEDR.MEDIA

WAR'S EFFECT

Contentious climate activism in Russia before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

by **Svetlana Erpyleva**

abstract

Based on a holistic case study of a climate movement in Russia that emerged several years before and dissolved shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this article explores the war's impact on civil society activism. Drawing on in-depth interviews with key participants conducted both before and after the war, the study identifies three typical activist career paths which shape engagement with and disengagement from the movement. The analysis of these career paths shows that the war did not introduce entirely new conditions but rather intensified problems the movement had already been struggling with. Moreover,

it further raised the risks of protest participation and shifted activists' attention from climate change to more urgent wartime concerns. The article contributes to understanding the Russo-Ukrainian war's effect on Russian civil society. It also contributes to the literature on disengagement and demobilization in social movements by promoting a career approach and addressing the broader question of how a large-scale political event can lead to the demobilization of a social movement.

KEYWORDS: Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia, civil society, climate activism, activist career, biographical analysis.

When Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022, both ordinary Russian citizens and analysts shared the feeling that life had been divided into before and after. This sentiment was particularly strong regarding the survival of civil society in Russia, which seemed to be in question due to the adoption of numerous anti-democratic laws and increasing repression. At the same time, early research on the topic shows that although democratic civil society groups in Russia indeed suffered following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many managed to adapt to the new conditions.¹ However, this research is limited by survivorship bias: since comparisons between the prewar and postwar periods are rare, and studies focus on the adaptation strategies of groups that have survived, those that did not survive remain absent from the analysis. Moreover, without systematically comparing civil society groups in Russia before and after the war, it is difficult to fully understand the war's effect on civil society – for example, whether the war led to a radical transformation or just reinforced pre-existing trends.

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent further authoritarianization of the regime affected civil society activism in Russia. It does so through a case study of a small, contentious climate movement that emerged several years before the war and ceased to exist immediately after it began. The analysis relies on in-depth interviews conducted with nearly all participants of the movement, both before and after the war. By examining activists' biographies and using Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a case, the article addresses the broader question of how a large-scale political event can lead to the demobilization of a social movement.

In this way, the article engages with social movement studies' literature on demobilization and disengagement, making a twofold contribution. First, it addresses the role of large-scale political events in the demobilization of movements – while most existing research has focused on their role in mobilization rather than demobilization. Second, it promotes a career approach as a bridge between research on individual disengagement and movement demobilization, which are typically treated as separate processes.

I BEGIN BY reviewing this literature and identifying its gaps. Next, I introduce the career approach as the theoretical framework of this paper. I then provide a brief overview of the current state of research on Russian civil society after the war. This is followed by a discussion of the paper's methodology and data, leading into the analysis. In the concluding section, I explain how my findings contribute to existing debates in the literature.

Demobilization and disengagement of social movements

In social movement studies, demobilization means the process by which collective action decreases in scale and scope, leading to the collapse of a movement.² Demobilization differs from de-escalation, as it always presupposes the complete dissolution of the movement.³ Scholars have identified several factors contributing to the demobilization of movements. First, changes in the political climate and intensified repression can suppress activism.⁴ Second, in some cases, reforms that align with a movement's demands can make the movement unnecessary.⁵ Third, co-optation by the regime can lead to a movement's decline.⁶ Fourth, counter-mobilization by opposing groups can have a similar effect.⁷ Fifth, demobilization can be provoked by endogenous factors, such as membership loss, leadership changes, alienation between leaders and rank-and-file activists, internal polarization (e.g., between moderates and radicals), or the departure of key political allies.⁸ Finally, some scholars highlight the role of unexpected events as a potential trigger for movement demobilization.⁹

DISENGAGEMENT OCCURS when individual activists leave a movement. Social movement scholars emphasize that disengagement is not merely the reverse of engagement; distinct factors influence disengagement, making it a separate

phenomenon that requires independent analysis.¹⁰ Individuals may leave movements for several reasons. First, it happens when they perceive that the costs of participation outweigh the benefits – for instance, when the risks of activism increase, or conversely, when the movement achieves its goals and participation no longer offers significant benefits. Second, they may lose commitment to the movement's goals or identity, particularly when they feel insufficient gratification. Fourth, they may experience changes in their personal lives, leading to biographical unavailability. Fifth, they may have negative experiences within the movement, such as conflicts with other activists. Sixth, they may suffer from burnout, experiencing emotional distress and a perceived loss of efficacy.¹¹ In all these cases, emotions play a crucial role in the disengagement process.¹²

Unexpected events are one of the factors contributing to movements' demobilization, and they naturally influence individual disengagement. Unexpected or critical events are understood here as occurrences endogenous to movements (e.g., a sudden failure to mobilize enough participants for a demonstration); small, everyday occurrences exogenous to movements (e.g., sudden police violence); and large-scale events also exogenous to movements (e.g., interstate wars, or national catastrophes). Unexpected events can make activists reevaluate costs and benefits of participation, experience burnout, lose

“UNEXPECTED EVENTS ARE ONE OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO MOVEMENTS’ DEMOBILIZATION, AND THEY NATURALLY INFLUENCE INDIVIDUAL DISENGAGEMENT.”

commitment, and so forth. Nevertheless, there is little research on how unexpected events affect movements' demobilization, whereas other factors – such as repression – have been extensively studied.

Moreover, the limited research that does examine the role of unexpected events in demobilization focuses primarily on the first two types of events identified above.¹³ For example, Demirel-Pegg analyzed how spontaneous communal violence during a protest campaign in India led to the withdrawal of popular support and forced campaign leaders to change their strategies.¹⁴ Following Staggenborg,¹⁵ he refers to such events as “critical encounters.” Similarly, Voss¹⁶ and Karmela & Kuburic¹⁷ explore how discouraging events (Voss) or morally injurious events (Karmela & Kuburic) – such as unexpected movement defeats – can undermine the perceived legitimacy of activism, create cognitive dissonance, and lead to activists' disengagement.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT scholars have examined what Staggenborg calls large-scale political events,¹⁸ but primarily in relation to mobilization rather than demobilization. Research shows that such events can generate new identities, frames, and repertoires of collective action.¹⁹ Additionally, they can bring together biographical experiences that would not typically intersect within a society, creating new forms of engagement²⁰. Although these effects are generally observed in both democracies and autocracies, the role of large-scale political events may have specific characteristics in authoritarian regimes. For example, while the U.S. invasion of Vietnam led to the rise of a large antiwar movement in the United States, Russia's invasion of Ukraine – after an initial wave of antiwar protests – resulted in a weakening of Russian civil society. In other words, when political institutions are structured to facilitate collective action, as they often are in democracies, shocking large-scale events tend to energize and mobilize public opposition. Conversely, when political institutions are designed to hinder collective action, as is typically the case in authoritarian regimes, the same type of event often triggers intensified repression and the closure of political opportunities for dissent.

Thus, the first key conclusion from this literature review is that, while it is clear that large-scale political events – such as international crises and wars – tend to negatively impact democratic civil society in autocratic settings, their precise role in the demobilization of movements and the disengagement of activists remains largely unexplored. This article fills this gap.

The second key conclusion from this literature review concerns the very distinction between demobilization – the macro-level process of a movement's dissolution – and disengagement – the process of individual activists leaving a movement, often influenced by psychological factors. Most research focuses on

one of these processes while treating them as analytically separate phenomena, even though scholars acknowledge their practical interconnectedness. As a result, as Demirel-Pegg points out, “we still have very little understanding of how personal-level circumstances translate into a collective disengagement from protests.”²¹ In this article, I argue that the analysis of individual disengagement can be a useful way to study movements' demobilization. To achieve this, we need an appropriate analytical framework, which already exists but remains underutilized – namely, the career approach and, more specifically, the concept of an activist career.

Theoretical framework: career approach

The concept of “career” was introduced by the Chicago School of Sociology and has three distinctive features. First, it integrates both the “objective” and “subjective” dimensions of an individual's life course. A career involves a successive change in an individual's statuses, accompanied by shifts in how “the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things that happen to him.”²² Second, a career always represents a social pathway shaped by

many similar individual trajectories. Third, a career unfolds in stages, during which individuals experience changes in their social position, perspectives, self-perception, and the way they are perceived by others.²³

I specifically rely on the notion of an “activist career,” which, within the Chicago School of Sociology tradition, has been used by Olivier Fillieule in his research on individuals' engagement in and disengagement from collective action.²⁴ According to Fillieule, an activist career illustrates “how, at each biographical stage, the attitudes and behaviors of activists

are determined by past attitudes and behaviors.”²⁵ Following Fillieule, I conceptualize an activist career as a social pathway that begins before an individual's engagement in collective action, thus accounting for the dynamic effect of biographical dispositions²⁶ toward activism and their formation throughout activism.

THE WORD “DYNAMIC” is key here, as biographical dispositions and other characteristics “are not bestowed upon individuals but rather are sequentially acquired, the order of which partially determines their meaning.”²⁷ Most importantly, the notion of career – particularly activist career – allows us to examine the “dialectic between individual history, social institutions, and, more generally, the context.”²⁸ In other words, by studying people's biographies of entering and leaving institutions and groups, we gain insight into how these institutions and groups are created, reproduced, and dismantled. Elsewhere, I have already introduced the career approach as a useful tool for connecting

“BY STUDYING PEOPLE'S BIOGRAPHIES OF ENTERING AND LEAVING INSTITUTIONS AND GROUPS, WE GAIN INSIGHT INTO HOW THESE INSTITUTIONS AND GROUPS ARE CREATED, REPRODUCED, AND DISMANTLED.”



In August 2018, outside the Swedish parliament building, Greta Thunberg started a school strike for the climate. Her sign reads, “Skolstrejk för klimatet,” meaning, “school strike for climate”.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Climate demonstration station at Mynttorget in Stockholm on September 22, 2023. Organized by Fridays For Future Stockholm, Week of Action for Social and Climate Justice and Fridays For Future Sweden.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the micro-level of biography with the macro-level of institutional and group formation.²⁹

In this article, the concept of an activist career is applied not only to individuals' life courses prior to activism and their activist involvement itself but also to their trajectories of leaving a movement, as the focus is on the demobilization of movements and the disengagement of activists. Thus, disengagement is considered a process rather than a single moment in time.³⁰ Applying the concept of an activist career to the study of disengagement allows me to explore, following the call of Nascimento, Santos, and Klandermans,³¹ not just the moment of leaving a movement but also the entire trajectory of participation leading up to it. In this sense, an activist career in this article is understood as a social pathway leading first to involvement in a movement and later to disengagement from it, consisting of successive changes in individuals' statuses and corresponding shifts in self-perception and perceptions of activism, where previously formed dispositions shape future dispositions, actions, and meaning-making. Empirically, a single activist career can be identified when multiple individual trajectories follow the same logic of stages (see more in the “Method and Data” section).

THE NOTION OF career allows us to bridge the micro- and macro-levels of analysis, rather than artificially separating them. It reveals how macro-level occurrences – such as, for example, political events, new reforms and laws, or developments within their own and other movements – are reflected in the activist careers, and how, in turn, these careers shape and influence broader social and political processes.

Using this approach, I analyze activists' biographies to explore the effect of a large-scale political event not only on the disengagement of individual activists but also on the demobilization of the movement as a whole. This approach is applied to the case of a single climate movement in Russia, which was created in 2019 and ceased to exist in 2022, immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This movement serves as a case study to explore how a large-scale event such as this war has affected civil society in authoritarian Russia. Therefore, before describing the case, I briefly review the existing research on civil society in Russia after the war.

Civil society in wartime Russia

The nature of Russia's political regime and its relationship with civil society has been evolving over the past two decades. In the early 2000s, scholars characterized Putin's regime as “hybrid”³² or “competitive electoral authoritarian”.³³ However, from 2012–2014 onward, it has increasingly been described as “stable electoral authoritarianism”³⁴ (no longer competitive), “full-scale authoritarianism”³⁵, a “consolidated authoritarian regime,”³⁶ or a “personalist autocracy”.³⁷ During this period, the Kremlin relied more heavily on repression³⁸ and enacted a number of anti-democratic laws³⁹. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has intensified this trend but has not yet transformed the regime into a mobilizing or totalitarian one.⁴⁰

The war gave rise to a wave of antiwar protests, which quickly came to an end due to strict laws censoring any antiwar (and anti-regime) activities or statements, violations of which were penalized with heavy fines and prison terms.⁴¹ These Kremlin

measures achieved their maximum intimidating effect without significantly increasing the scale of repression.⁴² As a result, oppositional activism was driven underground and transformed into anonymous messages in urban spaces, such as graffiti, posters, and drawings; antiwar signs in minority languages; anonymous oppositional (social) media; acts of sabotage; and seemingly apolitical volunteer initiatives to help Ukrainian refugees.⁴³ Other groups have chosen to gather strength and “lie low”.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, some legal organizations, mostly based outside of Russia, continue to provide legal assistance to those facing political repression and to individuals seeking to avoid conscription and mobilization into the war.⁴⁵

CIVIC ACTIVISM that did not directly challenge the regime managed to survive thanks to various factors, such as “rainy-day” funds, psychological support among activists, past experience in navigating crises and resisting political pressure, crisis management practices, and, in some cases, “the inability to leave the target audience to their own devices.”⁴⁶ Specifically, non-contentious environmental groups adapted to the new circumstances by avoiding any public expressions of discontent, refraining from openly challenging regime actions, practicing self-censorship in public statements, refusing to engage with politically sensitive issues (e.g., nuclear energy), and reducing international participation.⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that most of these tactics were not entirely new: many civic initiatives prior to the war had already publicly positioned themselves as “apolitical” and focused on local, “close-to-home” issues – both to better attract public sympathy and to avoid state repression.⁴⁸

At the same time, many civic groups, including environmental ones, lost members who emigrated after the war began and continued their activities abroad. Many activists also shifted their focus to addressing more urgent issues, such as participating in underground antiwar activities or assisting those directly affected by the war.⁴⁹

In a way, civic activism became more politicized – largely due to the actions of the authoritarian state itself. For example, the state began to fear and penalize various forms of citizen self-organization, thereby politicizing them. As a result, civic activists started to perceive their previously innocent and “apolitical” activities (e.g., nature protection) as potentially challenging to the regime – that is, as political.⁵⁰ Moreover, some forms of seemingly apolitical volunteering are seen by the volunteers themselves as a form of hidden protest against the war initiated by the Kremlin.⁵¹

THE WAR AND the consequent state policies also contributed to the creation of new formats for collective action – for example, military and paramilitary volunteerism, often initiated from above, or public discontent toward the war by those directly affected by it.⁵²

To summarize, existing research shows that, as a result of the war, oppositional activism was driven underground; civic, non-oppositional activism – including various forms of environmental collective action – faced numerous challenges but

managed to adapt, with many activists becoming more politicized; and new forms of collective action centered around the war emerged.

However, existing research on the war’s effect on Russia’s civil society faces two key problems. First, the overwhelming majority of studies examine civil society as it exists after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, without comparing the activities of the same organizations before and after the war – an essential step in truly understanding the war’s impact. Second, the exclusive focus on the postwar state of civil society leads to survivorship bias, as scholars primarily study organizations that withstood the war while overlooking those that did not survive. This article aims at overcoming these two problems. By applying the career approach to a case study of a single movement examined both before and after the war, I explore how the war affected civil society in Russia – what it changed, what tendencies it reinforced, what it dismantled, and what persisted.

Thus, the empirical research question this article addresses is: How do the activist careers of climate activists in Russia evolve before and after the war? Answering this question will help shed light on the broader issue of how the war has affected Russia’s civil society and led to the demobilization of some civic groups. Theoretically, the article demonstrates the advantages of a career approach in bridging macro- and micro-level analyses and contributes not only to the study of civil society in Russia but also to the broader literature on movement demobilization and activist disengagement.

Case, data, and method

The movement selected for this case study is, in some respects, rooted in a tradition of Russian civil society, yet it also exhibits distinctive characteristics. Russia has a long history of environmental activism, dating back to the perestroika era, when environmental mobilizations were among the few forms of collective action tolerated by the state.⁵³ In the 1990s, members of environmental NGOs primarily relied on international funding and professional expertise and largely avoided engaging ordinary citizens in their work.⁵⁴ Popular mobilizations at the same time existed separately and tended to focus on local ecological issues.⁵⁵ These local campaigns often centered on threats to familiar, “close-to-home” natural sites – such as forests, rivers, or parks – because this rhetoric resonated more strongly with public sentiment than abstract or global problems. This pattern reflects a broader trend in Russian civil society.⁵⁶ The climate movement examined in this article, addressed ecological issues familiar to the public, yet it was not anchored in local communities or focused on local threats.

It was founded in Russia in 2019. During its first year, it grew steadily, reaching approximately 500 participants in its internal chat by the end of the year, with around 30–50 activists actively engaged in on-the-ground activities at various times. Inspired by international youth climate protests and Greta Thunberg personally, the movement tried to raise awareness about climate change through contentious politics, organizing single-person pickets and “global climate strikes” (mass picketing) in differ-

ent Russian cities. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement began to change. As street protests – its primary mode of action – became impossible due to pandemic restrictions, activists searched for alternative forms of engagement. During this period, online educational events became the movement’s main activity. While some activists disengaged, new participants continued to join. By 2021, the movement faced growing challenges. Pandemic restrictions were still in place, and the state had introduced a new wave of repression. Additionally, activists became more and more disillusioned with the lack of visible impact from their actions and struggled to see a path forward. As a result, the movement’s activity slowed significantly. Finally, in 2022, following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the introduction of new repressive laws, the movement collapsed. It never formally announced its dissolution, and a few activists continued to keep its Telegram channel active by reposting environmental content from other sources. In the fall of 2023, some activists attempted to revive the movement, but their efforts were unsuccessful. By the time of follow-up interviews in the spring of 2024, the overwhelming majority of key activists acknowledged that they had not been involved in the movement since the war began and considered it non-existing.

I CONDUCTED two waves of in-depth biographical interviews with the same participants of the movement, both before and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The first wave included 25 interviews collected between September 2020 and May 2021, covering *nearly all core participants* of the movement at that time. Among them were 3 men and 22 women – a discrepancy reflecting the gender composition of the movement itself. The participants came from 11 Russian cities: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Sochi, Nizhny Novgorod, Kaliningrad, Vladivostok, Penza, Omsk, and Irkutsk. Eight interviews (conducted in Moscow and St. Petersburg) took place offline, while the remaining 17 were conducted online.

In the spring of 2024, I contacted all 25 participants to request a follow-up interview. 21 of them responded and agreed to participate, while the remaining 4 did not reply. Additionally, I conducted 2 interviews with activists I had not spoken to during the first wave. The gender composition of the second wave remained the same: 3 men and 20 women. Among the interviewees, 13 still resided in Russia, while 9 had emigrated either after or shortly before the war began. All second-wave interviews were conducted online.

To establish initial contact with the movement, I sent personal messages to the coordinators in St. Petersburg and Moscow via the social network VKontakte, the main Russian social media platform similar to Facebook. In these messages, I explained the goals of the project, the principles of data anonymization and

usage, and asked whether they would be willing to meet for an interview. All the coordinators agreed to participate. After meeting them, I asked them to recommend other members of the movement for interviews – this is how the rest of the interviewees were recruited. Three years later, I personally contacted all former interviewees, providing an update on the project’s development and inviting them to participate in a follow-up interview.

THE INTERVIEWS lasted between 50 minutes and 2,5 hours. The pre-war interview guide included a detailed biographical section covering participants’ life histories before and during their involvement in the movement, as well as questions about the movement’s goals and activities and their perspectives on environmental and political issues. The post-war interview guide, in turn, focused on participants’ experiences of leaving the movement and the war’s impact on their personal, professional, and activist lives. The interviews were conducted in Russian, the participants’ native language. All participants were informed about the study’s objectives and signed an informed consent form. Personal information was anonymized or removed from the transcripts. In this paper, interview quotes are attributed using pseudonyms, along with the participants’ gender and age as background information. To protect their confidentiality, all other identifying details, including home cities, have been excluded.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted in 3 steps. First, the initial and follow-up interview materials for each participant were synthesized into a 1.5-page biographical statement summarizing their trajectories of involvement and disengagement, along with their motives (place of birth, strong childhood memories, hobbies and interests in childhood, educational career, development of any interest/experience in ecology and politics, professional career, circumstances of learning about and entering the movement, activities within the movement, etc.). These statements detailed both the sequence of events and the interviewees’ interpretations of them. Second, individual trajectories were

compared, and participants with similar experiences and interpretations were grouped into the same “career” type. The number of such types was not predetermined but emerged organically from the data – three distinct types were identified, each comprising four to six trajectories, with several individual cases classified as exceptional. Finally, I analyzed how these careers paths reflect shifts in collective meaning-making among activists and the movement’s evolution under the influence of war.

Entering and exiting climate activism: Activist careers

I identified three typical career paths among interviewed participants of the movement: “ideologues,” “eco-conscious,” and “eco-activists.” Since the movement emerged as part of inter-

“ACTIVISTS BECAME MORE AND MORE DISILLUSIONED WITH THE LACK OF VISIBLE IMPACT FROM THEIR ACTIONS AND STRUGGLED TO SEE A PATH FORWARD.”



Friday for Future Russia, Facebook, post November 11, 2023: "Independent environmental media *Kedr.media* recognized as a foreign agent". We support them and oppose the law on foreign agents. From the beginning, it has been used as a means of pressure against those who spoke the truth about the environmental crisis."



Chocolate, the dog, takes part in a Fridays for Future protest in March 2020 with his owner and other young Russian activists.

PHOTO: © ARSHAK MAKICHYAN

national climate protests, familiarity with and inspiration from these protests – particularly Greta Thunberg's strikes – was a necessary biographical experience to enter it. However, each career path is additionally shaped by distinct pre-activist experiences that lead individuals into the movement. These unique backgrounds, which serve as biographical prerequisites for activism, are reflected in the career names: commitment to left-wing ideology, the formation of ecological consciousness, and prior experience in non-contentious ecological activism⁵⁷ As I demonstrate below, these experiences not only affect activists' engagement but also influence their trajectories of disengagement, with each career type following a distinct path out of the movement. At the same time, as the analysis shows, disengagement from the movement does not necessarily mean disengagement from activism altogether. Only 4 of the 23 activists interviewed completely withdrew from activism, and I describe these trajectories separately.

The classification presented below, like any other classification, is merely an analytical tool. In reality, individual trajectories are more diverse than the "ideal types" outlined here. However, these ideal types help us lay bare the logic of activist engagement and disengagement, understand the process of the movement's dissolution, and clarify the war's impact on the movement.

Ideologues

At the first stage of their activist careers, ideologues develop an intellectual commitment to left-wing political ideas. Environmental consciousness becomes part of their beliefs, though not the central one. At the second stage, they learn about interna-

tional and then Russian climate protests. The climate agenda fits well with their existing worldview, so, at the third stage, they join the Russian movement while continuing to be involved in other left-wing projects. At the fourth stage, usually from the end of 2020–21, against the backdrop of the pandemic, rising repression, and the movement's slowdown, they become less and less engaged in its activities. Ideologues begin shifting their focus to other projects that seem more relevant to them. At the fifth stage, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it becomes absolutely clear to them that climate activism is less urgent compared to the more immediate problems caused by the war, and they direct all their activist efforts toward addressing these issues.

ROMAN'S INDIVIDUAL trajectory illustrates the career of ideologues. Roman is born in Crimea (Ukraine), and his family moves to Eastern Ukraine when he is a teenager. Very soon, in 2014, he observes the beginning of the civil war: separatist sentiments are strong in this area, and the new Kyiv regime threatens to militarily suppress them. Roman's parents have pro-Russian sympathies, which he, as a teenager, shares. The family moves back to Crimea, escaping a possible war. There, in high school, he meets a teacher who makes him interested in left-wing ideas, mainly through reading recommendations. A friend of a friend invites him to take part in a left-wing summer camp. When he moves to St. Petersburg to enter university shortly after, he is already committed to an anarchist ideology and oppositional towards Russia's political regime. In St. Petersburg, he contacts one of the left-wing groups through common acquaintances and participates in some of their projects. Here, he also develops ecological awareness as part of his anarchist worldview. In 2019,

one of his political comrades invites him to participate in a global climate strike organized by the already existing Russian climate movement. The climate agenda fits well with his existing worldview, and at this time, the international youth climate movement is all over the news – so he takes the invitation. After that, he is invited to the movement’s chat, participates in the movement’s general meeting, and even takes on some coordination responsibilities. However, within a year, with the start of a demanding MA program, other anarchist initiatives requiring his attention, and the general slowdown of the movement, he becomes less and less involved in climate activism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the climate movement can no longer take to the streets, he loses almost all interest in the movement – and the passivity of other activists helps him not to feel responsible for not participating. When the war starts, he puts more effort into activism, but there is no place for ecological and climate activism in his agenda anymore. In his opinion, more relevant and urgent problems must be solved first. Thus, he stays in Russia and gets involved in activities of various left-wing oppositional groups, promotes political education, and helps political prisoners in Russia. In the interview, he explains:

And everyone immediately switched to discussing the war. [...] It’s hard to imagine that a war has started, and people are going on strike for the climate when there are a number of other pressing issues.

(m., 25 y.o., February 2024)

Eco-conscious

The representatives of the eco-conscious career, unlike ideologues, report caring about nature and animals since early childhood. Of course, such care is part of the story they tell about themselves, and I cannot establish whether this is factually true. However, it is important as a part of self-representation that representatives of this career path (and, as we will see below, most of representatives of eco-activist path as well) share. At the first stage of their career, the eco-conscious develops an interest in ecology and environmental protection and adjust their personal lifestyle accordingly. Unlike representatives of the two other career paths, they do not engage in any activism until, at the second stage of their career, they learn about international climate protests, Greta Thunberg’s strikes, and the broader climate agenda, which was previously unfamiliar to them. Unlike ideologues, for whom this knowledge aligns with an already existing worldview, it becomes a game-changer for eco-conscious: they realize that changing their personal lifestyle is not enough, that environmental problems are systemic, and that they require political solutions. Thus, at the third stage, they actively search for something similar to climate strikes in Russia

– this is how they find and then join the climate movement. However, after a year or two, at the fourth stage of their career, they become less involved in the movement due to the impossibility of street protests during the pandemic, the perceived passivity of other activists, and personal biographical circumstances. At the same time, after seeing how the state continues to hinder activists’ efforts to protect nature, the eco-conscious gradually become opposition-minded. Finally, when the war starts, it becomes clear to them that street politics in Russia is too dangerous and that other, more urgent issues than climate change require attention. Thus, at the fifth stage of their career, they switch to politically neutral professional activities in ecology (finding jobs in this field or pursuing professional ecological education) or focus their efforts on more pressing, mostly antiwar, topics.

KATYA’S TRAJECTORY is a typical example of the eco-conscious career path. She begins her story with childhood memories of her parents taking her into nature and teaching her to care for it – values that, according to her, became second nature to her. Yet she finishes school and even university without much thought about ecology or politics. Only as an MA student in Moscow, having moved there from her hometown, she watches a documentary about whales dying from plastic pollution and, shocked, begins reading about environmental destruction caused by humans. She takes this new knowledge to heart and soon adopts an almost zero-waste lifestyle. In 2019, she learns about international climate protests and, inspired, she researches climate change – a topic she hadn’t paid attention to before. This leads her to realize that personal lifestyle changes aren’t enough – systemic political solutions are needed. She finds Russian climate activists on social media and follows them. When they announce a global strike in Moscow that spring, she attends “just to watch.” But one

“THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ECO-CONSCIOUS CAREER, UNLIKE IDEOLOGUES, REPORT CARING ABOUT NATURE AND ANIMALS SINCE EARLY CHILDHOOD.”

of the organizers starts a conversation with her, takes her contact info, and adds her to the movement’s new chat. Throughout 2019 and 2020, Katya becomes increasingly active, eventually overcoming her fear and joining single-person pickets in Moscow. At the same time, she develops sympathy for oppositional activists, seeing how the state opposes any “good deed”. When the pandemic begins, she shifts to producing social

media content for the movement and takes an online course on eco-friendly business practices, hoping to apply them at the private clinic where she works as a manager. In 2021, amid a new wave of repression, she grows afraid of street protests. After the war starts, she abandons any thought of returning to them. She is also upset when some former co-activists who left Russia expect her to be more openly antiwar – as a result, she leaves all movement’s chats. Though she opposes the war, she knows speaking out is too risky. Instead, she focuses on professionalizing her environmental expertise: she takes another course on climate change and begins searching for a related job. She goes

through a difficult period, managing relationship issues and strained communication with prowar parents. Still, she joins an eco-club and gives public lectures on ecology. In late 2023, she finally finds a job at an eco-consulting firm and plans to develop her professional path – at least until contentious activism becomes possible again in Russia. This is how she justifies this choice:

I'm not ready to go to prison. I do some online pickets, I keep running an eco-educational blog and post there from time to time. That's what my activism looks like now. I've kept my eco-habits, I talk about them, show things – that's all part of it. Plus, now it's also my job. All of this is my activism. (f., 29 y.o., May 2024)

In other words, she sees her professional work as another form of activism – leaving the climate movement did not mean ceasing to be an environmental activist.

Eco-activists

Most representatives of the eco-activist career path, like the eco-conscious, report caring about nature since early childhood – or, alternatively, developing an interest in ecology as a school subject. In both cases, they share the first stage of their careers with the eco-conscious: they develop an interest in ecology and adjust their personal lifestyles accordingly. At the second stage, however, eco-activists become involved in non-contentious ecological initiatives – volunteering at local NGOs, participating in school eco-projects, or joining state-sponsored youth programs focused on the environment. At the third stage, they learn about international climate protests, discover the issue of climate change, and begin searching for more information about it. This leads them, at the fourth stage, to find out about “climate strikes” in Russia and join the climate movement, while continuing their involvement in other forms of ecological activism. Similarly to eco-conscious, at this stage many of them develop oppositional attitudes towards Russia’s political regime. At the fifth stage, during the pandemic, their activity in the climate movement declines as they shift their focus back to local (non-climate) ecological issues. When the war begins, climate activism seems less relevant, and the risks associated with street protests increase significantly. As a result, at the sixth stage of their careers, they concentrate all their efforts on local ecological activism – because this is where action still seems possible in today’s Russia.

THE ECO-ACTIVIST career path can be exemplified by Nastya’s trajectory. She recalls caring about nature, animals, and the harm humans cause to both for as long as she can remember. At the age of 13, she enrolls in a lyceum specializing in ecology and geology in a northern Russian city – mainly because her friends were study there. The next two years she describes as a “search for her real self”: she talks with others about protecting nature, studies geology, resists consumerism, read about global warming, and considers how she could make a difference. In 2018, at age 15, a friend invites her to a meeting of a local ecological

NGO. Initially skeptical – collective action always felt “weird” for her – she pushes herself to attend, enjoyed it, and soon becomes an active member. Within a year, she also takes part in oppositional activism, including support for Navalny’s presidential campaign. In 2019, inspired by international climate protests and Greta Thunberg’s “Fridays for Future” strikes, Nastya organizes her own solo picket. The eco-movement of which she is an activist shares her action online, tagging the national climate movement, which led one of its leaders to invite her into their internal chats. She quickly becomes the head of her city’s climate movement “cell,” running its social media, organizing street protests, and regularly skipping school on Fridays in the spirit of climate strikes. She also forms close friendships with climate activists from other cities. During the pandemic, Nastya becomes less active. The passivity of others and the lack of visible results diminish her motivation. In 2021, she deletes the cell’s social media accounts and declares it closed, feeling relieved to focus instead on tangible local environmental issues. Around the same time, the ecological NGO she is part of split into “youth” and “adult” wings, and Nastya becomes the leader of the youth group. After the war begins, she redoubles efforts to improve life in her city. Together with other youth activists, she creates art spaces for local artists. Though deeply shocked by the war, she explains:

I think we had no resources at all to help with the crisis. We wouldn't have had the strength to remotely assist people fleeing the country or raise money for the Ukrainian Armed Forces, or anyone else. But at that time, we were already interested in art. Through art, we really wanted to support those who stayed in [name of the city]. It was important to us to create a small spot where we could represent local people who have almost nowhere else to exhibit their work. (f., 21 y.o., April 2024)

Soon, Nastya becomes involved in additional projects through her youth organization: supporting local Indigenous peoples, learning their languages, and developing programs for local climate adaptation. At the time of the interview, she sees herself primarily as a local activist and cannot imagine living outside her home city and region.

Full-exits

Four former activists out of the 23 interviewed did not just leave the climate movement – they left activism altogether. Their biographical trajectories share two features: 1) relocation from one place of residence to another (in three cases, emigration from Russia), and 2) subsequent substantial life changes, dealing with which required time and left no room for activism. In other words, biographical unavailability⁵⁸, rather than Russia’s invasion of Ukraine or the increase in repression, have played a key role in pushing these individuals out of activism.

For example, Oksana’s trajectory would have been typical of the ideologue career path if she had not left activism altogether. A socialist and feminist with radical left views, she joins the

climate movement after being inspired by international climate protests. Similar to other ideologues, she continues participating in other left-wing projects at the same time. However, the war radically changes her life. Her partner, a Ukrainian citizen, urgently leaves Russia and moves to Georgia, and she follows him a few months later. Very soon, though, she has to return in order not to lose her job. The long-distance relationship does not work out, Oksana breaks up with her partner and develops depression, which leads her to stop following political news and leave all activist chats. When she overcomes depression a year later, she finds a new job and, as part of it, moves to a European country. After moving, she spends a lot of time adjusting to the new job and life in a different country and working on her mental well-being. During the interview in spring 2024, however, she shares that she has started considering returning to some form of activism – perhaps something local, she says, in her new country of residence.

War's effect

The three career paths – those of ideologues, the eco-conscious, and eco-activists – along with four individual exit trajectories, despite their specificities, share certain commonalities. Analyzing these shared features allows us to highlight the effects of the war on individual activists and the movement as a whole.

Thus, all these cases show that each activist's engagement began to decline already during the COVID-19 pandemic. It slowed down further with the new wave of repression in 2021, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered any remaining hopes for its revival. As we may remember, Nastya "closes" the cell of the movement in her city already during the pandemic. "There was the pandemic," she says, "and it was unclear how exactly to develop this cell – and whether it was even necessary at all" (f., 21 y.o., April 2024). Lusya stops going out with single-person pickets in 2021, because "it simply became scary." "I would go out with a picket, not even have time to take out the poster, and already see people in uniform coming toward me," she explains (f., 25 y.o., April 2024). Natalia also becomes less active a year before the war: "I don't want to completely dismiss it, but for me, it just felt meaningless" (f., 35 y.o., April 2024).

ACTIVISTS' DISENGAGEMENT trajectories allow me to identify the trajectory of the movement's *demobilization*. Essentially, the short-term mobilizing effect of excitement over international climate protests gives way, within a year, to disappointment with the lack of visible results from climate action in Russia. Then the pandemic begins, and the movement loses its main tool of action – street protest, referred to as "global strikes." Activists, already disillusioned, are forced to search for new formats of action. At the same time, repression intensifies, and many activ-

ists feel it no longer makes sense to risk their personal freedom for the abstract goal of raising awareness about climate change without any practical impact. Many are still willing to take risks – but only for something more concrete and tangible. As a result, many activists begin to reduce their involvement in the climate cause around the same time. Activities in the internal chats slow down, the movement's social media presence declines, and most importantly, the movement ceases to organize what it was created for – climate strikes.

In interviews conducted in 2021, several complain that the passivity of others demotivates them. In a way, on the eve of the war, the movement finds itself in a "vicious circle": only visible efforts by the majority to find a way out of the crisis could motivate individual activists to continue participating – but each individual, observing the passivity of others, remains passive themselves, thus reinforcing the cycle. As a result, the movement appeared to freeze on the edge between existence and non-existence.

Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brings a new wave of severe repression. By that point, not much changes – it simply becomes clear: for the time being, nothing can be done to preserve contentious climate activism in contemporary Russia.

EARLY RESEARCH ON Russia's civil society after the war shows that those civic groups which survived did so thanks to their prior ex-

perience of overcoming other crises, their crisis-management practices, and the fact that their target groups continued to require help and could not be left without support.⁵⁹ The climate movement, by contrast, had not successfully overcome the previous crisis – on the contrary, it was still in the midst of it – and therefore had not developed effective crisis-management practices. And unlike initiatives that support specific vulnerable groups – such as, for

example, women suffering from domestic violence or homeless people – the climate movement's "target group" was, in a sense, all of humanity, which for the most part denied the problem altogether and did not ask for help. To sum up, the war did not introduce entirely new conditions that suddenly destroyed the climate movement – it rather reinforced and pushed to the limit the problems and tendencies that had already been undermining the movement's existence.

Why, though, did the war have such a reinforcing effect? Part of the answer is obvious: in wartime Russia, repression increased significantly⁶⁰ and activists no longer had any doubts – street activism had become too dangerous. As Katya explains:

When the war started, I completely left the movement, I just stopped doing anything there. I don't even post anything about protests or pickets anymore. I still have my favourite posters, but I stopped doing anything with

“IN WARTIME RUSSIA, REPRESSION INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY AND ACTIVISTS NO LONGER HAD ANY DOUBTS – STREET ACTIVISM HAD BECOME TOO DANGEROUS.”

them. [...] I'm not ready to go to prison, let's be honest. I'm just not ready for that. (f., 28 y.o., May 2024)

Repression, however, was already quite significant before the war. Moreover, despite all the risks, the majority of activists, as I have shown above, left the climate movement but did not abandon activism altogether. Some even became involved in more risky endeavours, such as oppositional antiwar activism. This is why a key part of the explanation for why Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the last straw in the dissolution of the movement lies in the fact that it made many of its members view climate activism as less relevant in the face of other, more urgent problems. Sveta describes this shift very well:

After the war began, our activities almost completely stopped because we were all in a state of deep shock. At first, it was unclear *how we could even talk about climate issues when something like this was happening*. Like, are we supposed to keep talking about climate change? Personally, it seemed unimaginable to me, and I didn't know how to reconcile it in my mind. (f., 20 y.o., March 2024)

Angelina, who works as a journalist for an oppositional media outlet and still resides in Russia at the time of the interview, puts it even more directly:

The issue of climate change has faded into the background. I mean, my friends have been killed in the war. ... I live in Moscow. At one point, Prigozhin decided to march on Moscow. We had tanks near my house because I live in the city centre. On a psychological level, *I'm just not capable of thinking about anything else*. (f., 19 y.o., March 2024)

Margarita's logic is slightly different. Personally, she is still capable of thinking about climate change. However, she admits:

Honestly, *I don't want to explain to people that the flood happened because of climate change and not because of our government. I'd rather tell them that our government is terrible and that it's the government's fault they got flooded*. (f., 33 y.o., April 2024)

In other words, the logic behind her thinking remains the same: in wartime Russia, the priority is to fight the authoritarian state, rather than address the global problem of climate change.

Thus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine reinforces other tendencies that had already been undermining the movement beforehand – not only by increasing repression, but, most of all, by redirecting the attention of politicized activists toward the state

as the main enemy. As a result, their focus shifts away from the more abstract problem of climate change.

Conclusion

In this article, based on a holistic qualitative case study of a climate movement in Russia that demobilized following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I explored the war's impact on civil society in Russia. To do so, I collected data both before and after the war and used a career approach as a theoretical and methodological framework.

I identified three typical activist career paths among the members of the analyzed climate movement. The career of ideologues consists of five stages: developing an intellectual commitment to left-wing political ideas, becoming aware of international climate protests, joining the Russian climate movement, shifting focus to other left-wing projects, and eventually leaving the climate movement to concentrate on more urgent issues. The career of eco-conscious activists also follows five stages: developing an interest in ecology/nature protection and adapting the lifestyle accordingly, becoming aware of international climate protests, joining the Russian climate movement, becoming less active within the movement, and leaving to focus on profession-

alizing the activist expertise or addressing more pressing issues (such as antiwar activism). The career of eco-activists consists of six stages: developing an interest in ecology/nature protection and adapting the lifestyle, accordingly, participating in non-contentious eco-activism, becoming aware of international climate protests, joining the Russian climate movement, shifting focus to local (eco)problems, and eventually

leaving the movement to concentrate on local ecological activism. The analysis of these career paths reveals how early experiences of activist socialization have a long-term impact on individuals' careers. These early experiences contribute to the development of specific dispositions that guide the logic behind activists' choices, even after they leave a particular movement.

THE ANALYSIS of career paths shows that although the climate movement demobilized immediately after – and as a result of – the Russo-Ukrainian war, the war did not introduce entirely new conditions that suddenly destroyed the movement. On the contrary, it reinforced and pushed to the limit the very tendencies that had already been undermining the movement: disappointment over the lack of visible results, the high risks associated with participating in street protests, the absence of effective alternative formats, and frustration with the passivity of other activists. The war and the subsequent intensification of repression made participation in street protests far too dangerous, while at the same time making the issue of climate change seem irrelevant in comparison to the more urgent problems created by the war. Many activists remain willing to risk their

**“MANY ACTIVISTS
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freedom if necessary – but not for the long-term goal of improving climate policy.

This article makes several contributions to current academic discussions: it adds to our understanding of the effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war on civil society in Russia and contributes to the literature on demobilization and disengagement in social movement studies.

As for the war's effect on Russia's civil society, based on the case study of a single climate movement, this article shows that many activists, while exiting the movement, do not quit activism altogether – they simply refocus their efforts on other, more urgent issues. In other words, even when the war destroys movements, it is far from destroying activists' experiences, which are instead transferred to different areas of civil society. Existing research on the biographical consequences of activism confirms this conclusion: former activist experience makes future activist engagement more likely.⁶¹

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic – preceding the Russo-Ukrainian war – had already enabled the Russian regime to lay the groundwork for restricting civil society activity. Thus, the war did not introduce a completely new dynamic, but rather continued and intensified this existing trend. Similarly, even in the absence of the pandemic, the war may act as a “last straw” rather than the primary destructive force – it may reinforce processes that were already undermining movements. Lejdström's research on the demobilization of the “Fridays for Future” movement in Sweden shows that it occurred due to activists' biographical unavailability caused by other life commitments, perceived collective inefficacy, feelings of hopelessness, and psychological pressure resulting from participation⁶². All these factors – together with others specific to authoritarian regimes, such as the risk of repression – also contributed to the collapse of the Russian climate movement, with the war simply amplifying their effect. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian society has often been exoticized by outside observers, both academic and public. However, careful research shows that there is nothing especially unusual or exotic happening in Russia. In many respects, Russia should not be seen as a “special case,” but rather as a context where tendencies typical of other societies – including democracies – are more vividly manifested.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS this article makes to the literature on demobilization and disengagement are threefold. First, it shows how biographical dispositions formed prior to activism influence not only involvement but also disengagement from movements – supporting the idea that an activist career does not begin with the first activist experience, but much earlier in life.

Second, it problematizes the potential impact of large-scale political events on movements' demobilization. While their role in mobilization – through creating new identities and frames – has been widely discussed, less attention has been paid to how such events can also destroy movements, especially in autocracies where activism already faces an unfavourable context. This article shows one way this process can unfold. Large-scale political events almost always alter the political landscape; in the case

of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the space for collective action narrowed significantly. Unlike formative events that fuel movements by generating something new, this destructive event primarily reinforced existing challenges – highlighting the lack of concrete results from actions, increasing the risks of participation, and diminishing the perceived relevance of the climate cause. Some movements may withstand such impacts if they have protective mechanisms, such as established crisis-management practices or a target group that cannot be left without support. Without these mechanisms, it becomes much harder to resist the destructive effects of large-scale political events like interstate wars in authoritarian regimes.

Third, this article promotes the career approach in social movement studies and social science more broadly. While the empirical focus of this article was on individual activist trajectories, the career approach made it possible to draw conclusions about the demobilization of the movement as a whole and the broader effects of the war on civil society. In this way, it proves to be a valuable tool for bridging the often artificial divide between the micro-level of individual decisions and trajectories and the macro-level of social structures and organizations in which these decisions take place. ✖

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Meeting with a State Duma deputy on the problem of the development of Krylatskoe district, Moscow, August 20, 2024.



Gathering of Sholmovsky Lake defenders in the Zasviyazhsky district of Ulyanovsk; Ulyanovsk, July 19, 2024.



Deputies meet with Strogino residents who are trying to save Moskvoretsky Park from road construction and the development of a water protection zone; Strogino, Moscow, July 31, 2024.



Protest to draw public attention to the forest fencing in Smorodino, Sengileevsky District, Ulyanovsk Region, July 20, 2024.



Mass protest against the landfill in Koryazhma, Arkhangelsk region, August 7, 2024.



Gathering of Sholmovsky Lake defenders in the Zasviyazhsk district of Ulyanovsk; Ulyanovsk, July 19, 2024.

The Russian environmental movement and its potential for broader political change

by Vitaly Servetnik

abstract

Despite the repressions against civil society in Russia, the independent environmental movement has managed to adapt and survive. The environmental agenda in Russia remains important for the people, for local politicians, and for authorities. These factors lay the groundwork for a potential mobilization, politicization, and demand for system change. To enact this transformation, however, the author argues that professional environmentalists need to combine forces with grassroots protestors and embrace a broader socio-economic and intersectional agenda.

KEYWORDS: Russia, environmental movement, environmental justice, protests, politicization, system change, climate, civil society.

For over 25 years, the Russian environmental movement, as well as civil society in Russia as a whole, has faced enormous pressure. This situation has led to continued degradation of the environment in Russia.

At the same time, protest around local environmental issues not only continues but has also increased in scale. In 2023, there were 509 environmental protests documented, with 580 in 2024. The visibility of these environmental protests is also increasing: in 2023, environmental issues were the third most common reason for protests, while in 2024 they were cited as the second most popular reason.¹ In cities, most of these protests are directed against new or existing landfill sites, the destruction of parks and other green areas in or around the cities, new construction projects, and the pollution of air and water. In rural areas, people are protesting against extractive industries and tourism development.

Along with these ongoing environmental struggles, new grassroots environmental groups and initiatives are emerging.

Faced with pollution and development projects, local people fear significant negative impacts on their lives. This growing interest also reflects a desire for greater civic engagement, which environmental issues that directly affect people's lives seem to be well-suited to. For example, after a major oil spill in the Black Sea in 2024, thousands of volunteers from across the country came to the shores to clean beaches and birds. Many more assisted them from a distance with logistics, crowdfunding, and mobilization support. Volunteers organized themselves in a chat group in Telegram messenger with 100,000 members.²

In addition to the growing mass mobilization around environmental issues and protests, victories have been reported for some specific campaigns and certain rights protected. The majority of these victories concern local environmental problems and have been framed as "NIMBYism" [NIMBY standing for "Not in my backyard"]. 70 such victories were documented in 2023 and 78 in 2024, giving the protests a success rate of more than 10%. Of course, not all of the struggles included protests, and many victories were won on issues fought in previous years, but the recent successes still stand as empowering examples in the face of increasing repressions and war-time censorship.³

ON A LARGER SCALE, one can see that despite increased restrictions on political activity and the domination of the Kremlin-led agenda, national authorities view the use of seemingly democratic elections and other pluralist activities as a tool of self-legitimization. Local oppositional politicians use local environmental issues as an accessible arena in the political sphere, one that resonates with local people. The significant increase in attention paid to the environmental agenda in local politics started among independent municipal council members in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in 2017-2018. Even with the subsequent restrictions, a high level of interest in the environmental agenda has still been palpable in recent years. In 2025, following a call from several

“SINCE THE FOREIGN AGENTS LAW WAS ADOPTED IN 2012, MANY NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS HAVE FACED INCREASED PRESSURES, INCLUDING COMPULSORY LABELING, FINES, AND PUBLIC DEFAMATION.”

Moscow politicians, hundreds of people came to the reception of Putin’s administration to collectively submit their complaints regarding local social and environmental issues. With the usual form of mass protest impossible to arrange in Moscow, this act of gathering in a line to register a complaint was one of the biggest mass political actions of the year.⁴

However, Putin’s officials, fearing the potential for mass mobilization on environmental issues, are manipulating the environmental agenda in order to frame the narrative around environmental problems, show care for the environment and nature, and supposedly solve certain problems. In this way, officials are trying to manage the potential for protest within grassroots environmental groups. President Putin has long been known for his pictures with a tiger, for flying with endangered birds, and for saying he would join Greenpeace in his retirement. In 2025, he established the *Presidential Fund for Ecological and Nature Conservation Projects*, which receives 1 billion rubles each year.⁵ Most of these projects are focused on ecological education, recycling, waste cleanup programs, and tree planting – everything except challenging Russia’s extractivism and other systemic problems.

IN THE SAME VEIN, a countless number of pseudo-public consultative bodies have been created in the last decade at almost every federal, regional, and sometimes local ministry or body. They serve to create an illusion of public participation in decision making on environmental issues, or to record concerns over environmental problems. The goal of these agencies is to mire the issues in constant and misleading bureaucratic procedures until local people and genuine activists run out of time, energy, and hope. For the same reason, a number of environmental GONGOs (Government organized NGOs) were established in order to replace critical voices within independent environmental NGOs with a depoliticized “patriotic” or “constructive” environmental agenda.⁶

Internationally, Russia is also engaging in various fora on global environmental issues. Exploiting the fact that global environmental issues cannot be solved without the involvement of the world’s biggest territory, Russia sees these spaces as providing an opportunity to reduce its international isolation. For example, by joining the Paris Agreement in 2019, Russia has shown its openness to international cooperation after the isolation that followed its annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia was planning to manipulate its geopolitical influence by becoming a supplier of carbon credits to richer countries while also providing its technologies – such as nuclear power plants – to the Global South.

This international engagement opens up a possibility for the Russian environmental movement to influence Russia’s envi-

ronmental policy by challenging it in these spaces. In fact, we see that in all these areas, from local politics to the government’s openness or quasi-openness and its international forays, such engagement simultaneously creates the possibility and motivation for engagement by true environmental advocates.

The Russian environmental movement

The pressure on environmental NGOs in Russia started with Putin’s coming to power in 2000, increased over the years of authoritarian unification of power, and was exacerbated most recently by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the Russian environmental movement has experienced a gradual deregulation of environmental legislation, along with the shrinking of the civic space by means of growing repressions. In the last three years, more than 500 environmental defenders were killed, imprisoned, arrested, or fined in Russia.

Since the Foreign Agents law was adopted in 2012, many national and regional environmental NGOs have faced increased pressures, including compulsory labeling, fines, and public defamation. Since that time, many of these NGOs were forced to close their organizations or significantly limit their activities. 38 environmental NGOs, 2 environmental media outlets, and 4 individuals have been added to the registry of foreign agents, 34 of which have decided to close their legal entities entirely because of the difficulties of operating with stigmatizing labels. This pressure also caused great damage to nature conservation NGOs, the professionalized part of the environmental movement.⁷

IN AN ESCALATION of this trend, shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most branches of the international environmental NGOs were labeled “undesirable” organizations, an action that criminalized all their activities in Russia and forced them to leave the country. This made the work of the environmental watchdogs and their national-level advocacy almost impossible in Russia.⁸ At the same time, environmental problems in Russia didn’t disappear. On the contrary, having been turned away from some of the global markets, Russian capital has seen more investment directed toward development inside Russia. Without professional environmental NGOs addressing unsustainable development at an earlier stage, the country’s population is now facing more environmental issues at later stages: pollution, construction, and extraction.

These local environmental problems are in close proximity to the people and therefore easy to see, smell, and feel. Such environmental issues are connected with a range of human interests, from health and well-being to the future, especially for children. The local and visible nature of these issues is driving the commu-

nities they affect to react with further mobilization, despite the widespread fear of repression.

Without many avenues and tools for public participation and advocacy, local inhabitants are left with protest, sometimes including direct actions such as blocking roads and machinery or bringing down illegal fences. This, of course, most likely results in various forms of repression against the protestors, but the protests continue anyway. A common slogan for the grassroots activists is: "I'm not afraid of a fine if I have nothing to breathe."

Politicization of the environmental agenda and the environmental movement

For many years, the majority of the members of the Russian environmental movement positioned themselves as non-political for various reasons. First of all, years of repression and the intentional depoliticization of society in general made forging political plans a dangerous endeavor. Secondly, engaging with political forces on any specific point on the political spectrum was seen as dividing people who were actively engaging in environmental protection but happened to have different political views. Therefore, many professionals and expert NGOs sought to avoid any politicization of environmental issues.

Other, more internal reasons for the environmental movement avoiding the politicization of environmental issues concerned the movement's methodology, which focused on professionalized environmental NGOs. This meant that the movement relied mostly on environmental expertise, close ties with academia, and an ability to maneuver bureaucracy, with the result that the environmental watchdogs seldom looked towards popular mobilization efforts. It was this lack of interest and knowledge in popular mobilization that led to the lack of broader support for environmental groups when it was needed most, in the face of organized repression.

Additionally, professional environmental NGOs have tended to be focused mostly on global environmental issues, such as climate change and biodiversity. Environmental watchdogs often overlooked local environmental problems, sometimes even ignoring them. The channeling of international financial support for work on global environmental issues only reinforced this pattern. And finally, an inability within the environmental NGOs to explain the connection between local and global environmental issues, combined with the environmental movement's methodology, led to an even more entrenched divide between international, professional environmentalists on the one side and local, grassroots environmental activists (and the local population) on the other.

HOWEVER, THIS DIVIDE, along with governmental repression and green-washing, has had the result that those who are engaged with local environmental issues are often left unheard. But instead of being a purely negative force, this tension helps to further transform local activists into even more active citizens who question more deeply the dysfunction of the government and systemic structures, leading some of them into further politicization.

For example, many environmental groups in the beginning of



December 15, 2024, two Russian Project 1577 Volgoneft oil tankers, Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239, were caught in a storm just south of the Kerch Strait. Volgoneft-212, which was reportedly carrying about 4,900 tonnes of mazut, broke in two and sank, resulting in an oil spill and the death of one crew member. Volgoneft-239 was damaged, causing it to drift for several hours before running aground near the Port of Taman, Krasnodar Krai.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Kerch Strait oil spill elimination (2024).

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



A tent camp during the garbage protest at the Shies station in the Arkhangelsk region in June 2019. Photo taken by a protest participant.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the full-scale invasion of Ukraine made statements condemning the aggression and also protested in the streets.⁹ This was a clear extension of their environmental activism. The regions of Russia with the most active environmental groups and protests over environmental issues are among the top regions with environmental activists being persecuted for their anti-war stance.¹⁰

With the current level of repression and the regime's focus on the war in Ukraine and the war economy, professionalized NGOs cannot any longer effectively influence significant policy change in today's Russia with the same methods they previously used. For a more effective advocacy for system change rooted in popular support, the movement lacks the structures and strategies needed for popular mobilization. At the same time, grassroots environmental activists have the energy of the masses, fueled by evident environmental issues connected to similarly evident demands for environmental justice. Bringing together the knowledge and experience of professional environmental NGOs and the energy and mobilizational capacity of grassroots environmental activists is crucial and has already started to show us the power of political force.

One such example of successful cooperation has been seen in the "Russia is not a dump" movement.¹¹ Originating in a small village in the Arkhangelsk region, located on the border with the Komi Republic, it has been opposing a mega-landfill site intended for Moscow's residual waste since 2018. The movement brought together grassroots protesters and professionalized environmental groups. It also brought together people from different points on the political spectrum and received support from all the regional political parties – even the governing one. The movement quickly ignited solidarity across dozens of regions in Russia that suffered from similarly inadequate waste management policies by the Russian government, and it eventually sparked massive protests across the country, leading to demands for a change in national waste policy.¹² At some regional levels, protesters also called for the removal of governors who did not support the demands. As a result of the protests, not only was the landfill project canceled, but the governors of both the Arkhangelsk region and the Komi Republic were replaced by the Kremlin.¹³ With these actions, we saw the establishment and continued growth of an interregional environmental justice movement. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic greatly impacted the movement, freezing the mobilization process and splintering the groups over their positions on isolation measures and vaccination. The following invasion of Ukraine also contributed to the fading of this movement and a further split over that invasion.

NEVERTHELESS, within Russia's collapsing environment and social system and the protests around it, the potential of the environmental *justice* movement is still there. In undemocratic and

unequal social and economic systems, environmental issues are often seen as environmental injustices. To name just a few examples: the extraction of mineral resources in the regions of Russia in order to accumulate profit in the offices of Moscow-based extractive companies; reducing urban parks and green areas for the sake of more skyscrapers and malls, while the wealthy move to the still-green suburban areas; and transporting residual waste away from wealthy regions and overconsuming areas such as Russia's capital into other regions, sometimes thousands of kilometers away. The social and economic inequalities between the capital and the other regions are often reflected in protests against new development projects. Within Russia's national republics and areas with indigenous populations, such inequalities are exacerbated by racial inequalities, with the result that struggles for sovereignty are linked to demands for environmental justice. Similar systemic inequalities linking the environment with socio-political concerns are a disproportionate burden on women, which explains their increased engagement in grassroots environmental activism.¹⁴ This participation in the environmental movement reflects how,

as with indigenous sovereignty, women's liberation is also intrinsically linked with environmental demands.

As this article shows, however, engagement with these issues can lead to more attacks, and that is what we have seen within the human rights movement. It has been the object of attacks made in a more systemic and consistent

way than before, and also at an earlier stage. The previously mentioned feminist movement is currently undergoing a major crackdown and is being portrayed as "western", anti-family, and a threat to Russian traditional values.¹⁵ Similarly, the LGBTQI movement was not only attacked but declared illegal by a corpus of homophobic legislation and labeled as an extremist organization.¹⁶ Indigenous rights movements were also criminalized by declaring some of them "extremist organizations" and spreading fear of collaboration with others.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Russian environmental movement protected itself by hiding in depoliticization and not showing enough solidarity to more marginalized parts of civil society.

Moving forward towards system change

With the current global economic model, the demand for development and for natural resources will only increase the number of environmental conflicts both worldwide and in Russia. This offers the ongoing potential for popular mobilization against environmental injustices and related social and economic injustices. Similar trends are being seen across the globe in many countries with different political regimes, where, as in Russia, environmental issues are intrinsically linked to socio-economic issues.

"IN UNDEMOCRATIC AND UNEQUAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS, ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ARE OFTEN SEEN AS ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES."

Because of its relatively privileged position of not being completely criminalized, the Russian environmental movement currently has great potential both for maneuvering within Russian political-administrative spaces and for collaboration across movements inside and outside of Russia. If we have the space, we should use it.

THE RUSSIAN environmental movement thus has great potential to turn local mobilization and rebellion into a mass movement for system change. To do so, however, will not only require linking the various social, economic, environmental, racial, gender-based, and other movements together but also that such work is done in both local and global arenas, ultimately establishing a united front of knowledge and efforts. Such a movement in Russia could not only significantly impact broad politicization and democratization of Russia itself – similar to the role of the environmental movements before and during perestroika – but also contribute to the global social-ecological struggle for justice.

Vitaly Servetnik is a grassroots environmental activist from the Murmansk region, Russian Arctic, and the founder and coordinator of the Environmental Crisis Group, supporting grassroots environmental human rights defenders in Russia. ✖

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”And this is not a spy novel”

Researching activism in Russia after 2022

by **Elisa Marin** and **Oliver Skye**

abstract

This essay examines the methodological, ethical, and safety challenges of researching civil society and activism in Russia after 2022. Drawing on recent fieldwork experience, we discuss the growing importance of ethnographic engagement, heightened risks for researchers and interlocutors, challenges of trust-building, anonymization, and blurred boundaries between analysis and advocacy. We argue that these conditions reshape both fieldwork practices and knowledge production, raising broader questions about the future of qualitative research in authoritarian contexts.

KEYWORDS: Russia, civil society, ethnography, fieldwork, research ethics.

Research on civil society and activism in Russia after 2022 raises a number of methodological questions, including ethical and safety-related challenges. Scholars conducting fieldwork in Russia are compelled to revisit these challenges, rethink them in relation to their specific field, and develop context-sensitive solutions. Drawing on our experience of researching activism in Russia after 2022, we address several of these challenges.

Why is ethnographic fieldwork important?

The risks faced by researchers have intensified since 2022 (see below). Together with sanctions (including restrictions by foundations and Western universities on funding travel



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

and research within Russia) this has shifted the study of Russian society toward remote, online-based methods. While such approaches were previously suitable for analyzing the structures and functioning of civil society, they are less effective in capturing current realities, as they provide limited access to deeper layers of significant information and the conditions under which it emerges.

THE PARADOX IS that in closed authoritarian societies publicly available information is often tightly controlled by the state. It means that public and open materials often offer a one-sided or distorted view of reality, with biases and gaps in key information. Due to time and access constraints, the analysis of online materials and remote interviews cannot substitute

for in-person long-term engagement, as complex meanings and details are often lost in online communication and text analysis.

Given this challenge, direct communication with individuals and ethnographic everyday observations give a better understanding of the interpretive frameworks people use to structure their social life. At the same time, interlocutors often rely on indirect, metaphorical forms of expression using ambiguity, pauses, implicit references, gestures and embodied cues that are difficult to interpret online. Yet, ethnographic fieldwork extends beyond interviews to immersion in everyday life – public spaces, informal gatherings, and events. Such observations, along with off-record conversations, are crucial for contextualizing and interpreting what remains unsaid –

glances, hints, and silences. Online methods therefore remain supplementary.

Another important reason to use ethnographic methods in studying contemporary Russian society is its rapid transformation. Even those who left early in 2022 at the outset of the full-scale invasion often struggle to grasp current conditions. Therefore ethnography and its methods become paramount as they allow us to understand social reality more fully and capture small changes and the evolving “universe of meanings” taking shape in Russia.

However, even when researchers gain direct access to informants inside Russia, the research process is complicated by safety concerns and self-censorship on both sides. Under these constraints, collaboration between scholars based within the country and colleagues abroad is likely to become a dominant mode of research. This, in turn, requires new formats and ethical frameworks that address anonymity and security – issues we discuss below.

Preparing for fieldwork in a new safety regime

Repressive laws, surveillance, denunciations, wiretapping, and criminal cases against activists, journalists, and scholars have raised safety requirements for researchers and research participants in Russia to an unprecedented level. Opposition-minded activists in Russia are exposed to a heightened risk: their activities are subject to intense scrutiny and surveillance by the security services, which complicates research at all stages. As researchers, we assume responsibility for the safety of our interlocutors for the whole research process. This includes digital security: choice of communication channels, sharing of disclosed information, and managing data traces. We are aware that our actions affect not only future access to the field but also the well-being of our interlocutors and ourselves. Under these conditions, preparation for fieldwork often resembles a “spy novel”, demanding constant vigilance from all involved rather than proceeding as a standard research process.

FOR US AS RESEARCHERS, the following has become part of everyday practice:

- consulting digital security guidelines and specialists;
- using new or specifically tailored to our purposes devices;
- creating separate social media accounts for fieldwork;
- arranging contacts with lawyers whose contact details must be memorized;
- keeping emergency contacts inside and outside the country close;
- using code words and emergency communication protocols;
- using VPNs and secure communication apps;

- establishing secure protocols for data transfer, storage, and deletion.

THESE PRACTICES ARE not exhaustive and must be adapted to situational challenges. The problem is compounded when interlocutors inside Russia demonstrate lower levels of caution, as perceptions of risk vary. Scholars must be prepared for surveillance, document or phone checks, possible monitoring of interview settings, and situations in which researchers become subject to surveillance, even when they are not the primary target.

Challenges of field access

Following the escalation of repression in Russia since February 2022, we have encountered significant difficulties conducting fieldwork. On the one hand, our social networks have weakened due to emigration of colleagues and acquaintances; on the other, we see an expanding atmosphere of fear among civil society actors. As a result, we observe increasing “invisibility” of activist work, as initiatives and their participants are often difficult to trace through remote sources. Together, these factors create significant obstacles to contact-building, meeting arrangements, and fieldwork organization.

Preparing for fieldwork across multiple regions is challenging and requires extensive preparatory work: online meetings and pilot interviews, analysis of news reports and “rumors,” as well as access to closed online groups. In searching for interlocutors, the primary method is the “snowball” recruitment technique, initiated before departure and extended during fieldwork. Working with purposeful sampling we hardly can control the selection to the fullest: often it is not only we who choose interlocutors, but it is them who choose us.

Thus, while preparing the field we often grapple with the unknown: we are never certain how relevant a conversation will be for our research objectives; the risk of last-minute interview cancellations driven by distrust and concerns also has increased. In addition, informants living under conditions of constant pressure, uncertainty, and emotional strain may withdraw from ongoing interviews at the slightest feeling of discomfort or pressure.

EVEN TASKS that appear straightforward acquire additional complexity, such as safe meeting locations without unwanted “ears” in a space where acoustics do not carry conversations too far. We leave the choice of meeting locations to our interlocutors, as they are more familiar with their surroundings and tend to select spaces that are comfortable for them. However, we are sometimes taken to crowded, noisy places where loud music prevents eavesdropping, but also makes recording and transcription more difficult.

These above-mentioned challenges have methodological con-

“OUR ACTIONS AFFECT NOT ONLY FUTURE ACCESS TO THE FIELD BUT ALSO THE WELL-BEING OF OUR INTERLOCUTORS AND OURSELVES.”

sequences. Traditionally, qualitative research treats individual practices as building blocks of the “social fabric”, assembling a “mosaic” of practices and meanings constituting everyday life. Due to the existing limitations, we have to rely more on extrapolation from rather incomplete data: just five or six “mosaic pieces,” rather than twenty or thirty as before. In the classical model of qualitative research, data collection ends once “saturation” has reached – a subjective but empirically grounded threshold after which the researcher leaves the field. In such constrained conditions, limited field access forces us to exit the field with a sense of “mild hunger”.

Trust, risks, and vulnerability in research

Trust is a crucial issue in establishing contacts and conducting fieldwork. Researchers’ reputation and social networks remain important for building trust, however, the situation has become significantly more complex. Today, vetting prior to each interview typically involves two stages: recommendations from trusted individuals (preferably two or three), and independent verification of the researcher through publicly available online information. Interlocutors who agree to meet need to clearly understand who you are and your research aims. It has several relatively new consequences.

First, in a context of widespread fear and paranoia, as described by many activists we talked to in Russia, the researcher’s self-positioning becomes a key element of trust-building. The basic rule remains unchanged: avoid lying; still, different aspects may be highlighted. For instance, in initial online contact, it may be preferable to emphasize prior experience of working in Russia rather than residence abroad. The fact that a researcher, even if Russian, lives abroad can be problematic for some interlocutors: Western sources of research funding combined with a broader fear of so-called foreign influence, can make establishing trust difficult.

Second, potential interlocutors now seek to verify the researcher’s identity. Openness is necessary for establishing contact. But the more widely information about the researcher and the project circulates, the greater the likelihood that it will reach the security services. If information is leaked that a foreign-based researcher has entered the country to conduct interviews with opposition-minded Russians, this could lead to the potential consequences including designation of a scholar as a “foreign agent” or “undesirable,” and criminal charges of state treason or anti-state activity, deportation, or imprisonment. Thus, on the one hand, the classical issue of inequality between the scholars and research participants is exacerbated by the heightened level of risk for oppositional activists. On the other hand, researchers themselves are highly exposed to risk.

Third, even though the risks faced by our interlocutors in

Russia are constant, this very constancy can render them less acute in both perception and practice, as routine activities are conducted “under the radar.” By contrast, a researcher arriving from abroad effectively undergoes a kind of “rite of passage”: upon crossing the border, they are exposed to the inevitably heightened scrutiny by the security services. This may increase not only the perceived level of risk, but also the likelihood of becoming the subject of inspections. Interlocutors additionally appreciate researchers’ willingness to engage with individuals designated as “foreign agents” or involved in criminal cases, often perceiving this as a form of civic and professional courage.

THIS IS HOW trust operates under a repressive regime: the positions of scholars and research participants become partially equalized, as mutual openness renders all parties vulnerable within a shared zone of risk. Thus researchers’ relative equality in exposure to risk not only provides a basis for trust but also helps to flatten hierarchies and bring the positions of researcher and interlocutors closer together.

Personal safety and anonymity

Problems related to safety, which challenge established methodological standards in social research, do not end when fieldwork is over; these difficulties extend to dissemination of results.

In anthropology, following the methodological debates of the 1980s¹ and in the 1990s² the importance of reflexivity and transparency became firmly established, including detailed accounts of data production. Today, in research on civil society in Russia, data are often heavily anonymized or withheld due to risks. Under these conditions, the issue is no longer primarily “thick description,”³ but the relevance of presented material for academic use.

A high degree of anonymization leads to published findings only approximately reflecting social reality. Significant information is removed: contextual details, geographical references, biographical trajectories, as well as gender and age – anything that could potentially enable identification of interlocutors. Preparing texts now involves

multiple rounds of security-oriented editing and, in some cases, approval from research participants.

This shifts the genre of presenting research findings closer to fiction than to an academic article. The resulting texts may resemble narratives about an imagined country: principles of data transparency are compromised, and colleagues are required to trust our conclusions in the absence of complete information. Such abstraction raises questions and skepticism within the academic community. Nevertheless, unlike fiction, these accounts remain grounded in real life situations and social practices. The difference between the work of a social researcher and that of a writer lies in the fact that the latter creates a

**“PREPARING TEXTS
NOW INVOLVES
MULTIPLE ROUNDS OF
SECURITY-ORIENTED
EDITING.”**

fictional reality, whereas we produce a glimpse of reality. Rather than fabricating, we selectively present material to reduce risk while preserving analytical meaning.

A similar issue arises around the anonymization of researchers and the use of pseudonyms. Research on Russian society is subject to scrutiny by security services and their informants, making the disclosure of researchers' identities especially sensitive. This new "audience" shapes how texts are written, including what information they do – and do not – contain.

ON THE ONE hand, publishing under pseudonyms reduces risks and enables continued access to the data inside the country. On the other, anonymity limits participation in academic debate and affects career development and recognition. Confronted with this dilemma, researchers must weigh risks and decide under which name to publish. Like their interlocutors, researchers have private lives and much to lose. The risks they face are not purely professional but also personal: losing the ability to travel to Russia can mean a broken personal ties, including contact with family members.

These conditions raise ethical concerns: in collaborative projects, authorship is often attributed to scholars based outside the country, who enjoy greater visibility and face fewer risks, while those conducting fieldwork remain anonymous or publish under pseudonyms. Although often justified on safety grounds, this does not resolve the ethical tensions involved.

Bias and advocacy

A politically neutral study of civil society in Russia after 2022 is difficult to imagine, challenging the principle of "freedom from value judgments".⁴ Like many of our interlocutors, we hold anti-war and anti-regime positions that inevitably shape our work. Alongside analysis, we often seek to support the communities we study, creating methodological and ethical tensions.

APPROACHES that blur the boundary between scholarship and activism – such as participatory action research – are now widely accepted. Yet, the applied nature of research on activism makes it difficult to separate analysis from advocacy, potentially affecting how academic contributions are perceived. This tension has intensified as the marginalization of Russian studies in international academia has reduced funding. Projects are increasingly supported by policy-oriented organizations, which often expect practical recommendations. Researchers engaged with oppositional civil society may, in this context, prioritize applied outputs over academic objectivity, even when funders formally request neutral scientific analysis. It forces the academic community to navigate the boundary between empirically grounded inquiry and advocacy. A common

strategy is to distinguish clearly between publication genres: applied reports may offer recommendations, while academic work should prioritize analytical rigor and methodological transparency.

Against this background, emotional involvement presents a challenge. Close engagement with interlocutors, combined with researchers' own sense of insecurity, can shape interpretations and, in policy-relevant research, influence the resulting recommendations. To mitigate this, researchers can document their emotional responses during fieldwork and incorporate reflexive, autoethnographic elements into the analysis, allowing readers to assess impartiality.

Concluding remarks. From exception to condition

Having examined challenges faced by researchers studying civil society in Russia today, we may conclude that challenges described in this essay are not unique to Russia; similar constraints confront scholars working in other authoritarian and violent contexts.⁵

This raises a set of open questions. Is it time to reconsider the methodological standards of academic social research – revising ethical frameworks, updating fieldwork practices, and integrating these changes into the training of future scholars? Against the backdrop of the rapid global spread of far-right

ideologies and authoritarian tendencies, what was once a marginal experience – largely confined only to scholars working in authoritarian and hybrid regimes – may now be becoming central to the discipline. In this sense, such challenges may be less an exception than an emerging norm within contemporary social research. ✖

Elisa Marin and **Oliver Skye** are pseudonyms used for safety reasons by two researchers who regularly conduct fieldwork inside Russia.

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“ANONYMITY LIMITS PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC DEBATE AND AFFECTS CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND RECOGNITION.”



Spray-painted on a snowbank in the Russian city of Perm, this graffiti reads “Stop bombing Kharkov.”

PHOTO: TWITTER/@RUSMILKSHAKE

Afterword.

Russian civil society under authoritarianism and war

Baltic Worlds’ Special issue “Civic Activism in Russia” offers a unique glimpse into the Russian civil society shortly before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As the authors of the issue observe, the impact of the war has made civil society extremely complex and transnational. Besides overviews of the contemporary civic activism in Russia

(Kalinina, Meyer-Olimpieva; “Lessons of Unfreedom”), the collection includes also in-depth studies of selected grassroots initiatives, including feminist (Zhaivoronok), environmental (Althier et al.; Erpyleva; Servetnik), decolonial ethnic (Kuikka) movements as well as activism of professional associations of teachers and physicians. Previous studies on civil society in Russia after 2022 are mostly written by

scholars based in Europe and are focused on emigrant activist communities.¹ A major strength of this special issue is the insider perspective of individuals still residing in Russia and resisting the ruling regime in diverse ways. To my knowledge, it is one of the first attempts to examine Russian civil society from within.² Besides that, with a few exceptions cited in some of the contributions, previous studies are

“AS THE AUTHORS OF THE ISSUE OBSERVE, THE IMPACT OF THE WAR HAS MADE CIVIL SOCIETY EXTREMELY COMPLEX AND TRANSNATIONAL.”

“THE TEXTS THAT COMPRISE THE SPECIAL ISSUE ARE PIONEERING STUDIES THAT WILL HOPEFULLY LEAD THE WAY FOR FUTURE RESEARCH OF THE RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CONDITIONS OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND WAR.”

predominantly focused on the parts of civil society that stay in opposition to the ruling regime, while some contributions of in this special issue (Meyer-Olimpieva and Althier et al.) even address pro-governmental initiatives within pro-governmental initiatives from below. Therefore, the texts that comprise the special issue are pioneering studies that will hopefully lead the way for future research of the Russian civil society in the conditions of authoritarianism and war.

AS MANY AUTHORS of the special issue point out, phenomena that they study are not uniquely Russian. Authoritarian states still exist in different parts of the world and political activists as well as regular citizens resist the ruling regimes in various fashions. Therefore, theoretical and empirical insights generated by scholars of the contemporary Russian civil society, including the contributions of this collection, can help better understand dynamics of civil societies in other authoritarian contexts.

The articles on different forms of resistance within the professional communities of schoolteachers and physicians show that protest, even in very implicit forms, can be found in unexpected places and forms. Scholars of Russian civil society therefore need to pay attention to different environments in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of resistance strategies and the potential for political activism. For example, in one of his recent works, Mikhail Suslov shows that nostalgic groups on social media can become spaces in which alternative post-Soviet identities emerge, partially resisting or sidestepping the Kremlin's dominant geopolitical mythology.³ Although these expressions do not constitute direct resistance, they nevertheless suggest that even individuals who are not politically

active may seek alternative understandings of Russia and its place in the world that differ from the narratives promoted by official propaganda. This may indicate a degree of alienation from the ruling regime that could potentially develop into political activism.

THE ARTICLES in this collection, along with other studies of contemporary Russian civil society, acknowledge its increasingly transnational character since the beginning of the war. However, this transnational dimension has rarely become the central focus of scholarly research.⁴ As a result, we still have contradictory information about the transnational connections between activists who chose to emigrate and those who stayed in or returned to Russia. In this issue, Ekaterina Kalinina describes a growing gap since 2023 between political emigrants and activists remaining in Russia. At the same time, some activist groups appear to have succeeded in maintaining cooperation across borders. The content of the Telegram channel created by the movement Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) clearly shows that activists located both inside and outside Russia coordinate their actions.⁵ The same appears to be true of Memorial, the international human rights organization founded in Russia and dissolved by court order at the end of 2021. During the war, however, some Memorial activists continued operating inside the country while remaining in contact with the organization's branches abroad.⁶ It is therefore important to study whether activist groups based abroad and inside Russia continue to cooperate, the forms this cooperation takes, and whether coordinated actions by emigrants and those who remained in Russia could become the basis for a broader movement in the future.

Under conditions of authoritarianism and large-scale activist emigration, digital spaces have become key arenas for organizing and mobilizing support. At the same time, studies of digital activism in Russia since 2022 are not many. Even in this collection only Daniil Zhaivoronok's contribution is focused on the issue. So far, scholars have been interested in digital activism of FAR⁷ as well as other anti-war groups operating through Telegram,⁸ local activists,⁹ just to name some examples. Hopefully future research will discuss digital activism of other political groups, thus, generating new knowledge on resistance to authoritarianism in digital spaces.

Many contributions to this collection include explicit and implicit comparisons between the Soviet period and the contemporary situation, particularly regarding the repressive character of the state and the different strategies of resistance developed by civil society, to name just two examples. Is Russia truly returning to the Soviet past, or are we witnessing a different kind of transformation? In order to answer this question and better understand certain peculiarities of contemporary Russia, historical studies that place such comparisons at the center of analysis are needed. Moreover, historical research can help further develop another perspective present in many of the contributions: an understanding of how Russia's post-Soviet trajectory has led to the emergence of the contemporary authoritarian state and its effects on the population.

ALTHOUGH THE FOCUS of this collection is on civic activism within Russian civil society, several contributions offer explanations for the relative stability and resilience of the Putin regime. Even when many Russian citizens do not support



Graffiti in Moscow by an artist named Zoom reads, "You're dragging us to hell."

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/@ZOOMSTREETART

the policies of the current government, relatively few are willing to engage in open protest. One major reason for this cautious attitude lies in the highly repressive conditions that have dominated life in Russia since February 2022. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state has introduced increasingly restrictive legislation, including laws criminalizing the "discrediting" of the Russian army and the dissemination of so-called "false information" about the military. These laws have led to fines, dismissals from employment, and long prison sentences for anti-war activists,

journalists, and ordinary citizens expressing dissent. Under such conditions, many dissatisfied individuals turn instead to forms of what Irina Meyer-Olimpieva calls "silent resistance" and what the article on teachers' resistance describes as "double-speak." In this way, dissatisfaction continues to exist within society and is expressed without taking the form of visible public protest. However, such forms of resistance do not fundamentally disrupt the system, which therefore persists. This raises several important questions: How can such a system be destabilized? Is open protest possible despite the crimi-

nalization of political activism and the increasingly repressive character of Russian legislation?

SCHOLARS OF RUSSIAN civil society often describe it as fragmented, unable to collaborate across ideological boundaries,¹⁰ and therefore ineffective in its struggle against the regime. Eva Kuikka's contribution to this special issue questions this view by arguing that decolonial ethnic movements eagerly incorporate struggle for women's and LGBTQ rights in their agenda. A quick look at the Telegram channel of FAR reveals that the feminists

"IS OPEN PROTEST POSSIBLE DESPITE THE CRIMINALIZATION OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND THE INCREASINGLY REPRESSIVE CHARACTER OF RUSSIAN LEGISLATION?"

promote agenda of ethnic minorities and LGBTQ people. According to historian Yulia Gradszkova, FAR has been very successful in creating intersectional solidarity among different groups dissatisfied with Russian state policies. Therefore, unlike other male-dominated opposition groups, feminists are able to work across political divisions.¹¹ These cases show that different social movements can work together in attaining common goals of liberation, empowerment and decolonization.

THE ESSAY BY Vitaly Servetnik in this issue even argues that the grassroots environmental movement could foster collaboration across different oppositional movements both in emigration and in Russia because of its relatively privileged position of not being criminalized by the authorities. This implies an opportunity to create a broader movement for system change. Insights from Svetlana Erpyleva's article show that many environmental activists turned to antiwar activism following the beginning of the full-scale invasion. This indicates that the politicization of a currently apolitical environmental movement is a real possibility. Focused studies of collaboration among different segments of Russian civil society could help determine whether mass mobilization for systemic change around FAR, the environmental movement, or another civil society initiative is truly possible. ✖

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SINCE FEBRUARY 24, 2022 the journal has in response to Russia's full scale invasion taken

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The journal's Scholarly Advisory Council consists of international scholars, representing different disciplines and with specific knowledge on the area.

The Scholarly Advisory Council

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The Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University invites paper and panel submissions for its 2026 Annual Conference. This year's theme "The Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe in the Emerging Global (Dis)Order" takes as its starting point the observation that the apparent stability of the Western liberal order has always been an illusion.

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- How are various Eastern European "playbooks" adapted to new environments, by whom, and with what effects?

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- How are particular aesthetics – and counter-aesthetics – mobilized in service of the new world order? What cultural forms enable or resist it?
- How does technology enable these transitions and ruptures? How has communication technology been weaponized – and deployed in resistance?
- How are transformations of global capitalism – deglobalization, financialization, rising inequalities – implicated in regional and global upheavals?
- What happens to democratic institutions caught up in this reordering, and what role does disillusionment with "the West" play?
- How does militarization and mobilization in the face of threats from Russia, China, and others influence societies, institutions, and public discourse?
- How do agents of illiberal reordering appropriate the language of rights and freedoms – and how can this be meaningfully countered? ❌



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Anton Shekhovtsov.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Anton Shekhovtsov is one of Europe's leading scholars on Russian foreign policy, the European radical right, and the networks connecting illiberal actors across borders. His research examines how authoritarian and far-right movements in Russia and Eastern Europe forge alliances with Western populist and extremist parties – making his work directly relevant to the conference's exploration of illiberal playbooks and the emerging global (dis)order.

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