"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.

"OUR ACTIONS AFFECT NOT ONLY FUTURE ACCESS TO THE FIELD BUT ALSO THE WELL-BEING OF OUR INTERLOCUTORS AND OURSELVES."

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-

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 1980s[1] and in the 1990s[2] 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.

"PREPARING TEXTS NOW INVOLVES MULTIPLE ROUNDS OF SECURITY-ORIENTED EDITING."

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

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.

"ANONYMITY LIMITS PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC DEBATE AND AFFECTS CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND RECOGNITION."

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

references

1 James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

2 Allison James, Jenny Hockey, and Andrew Dawson, eds., *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1997).

3 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

4 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949).

5 Elisabeth Jean Wood, "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones," *Qualitative Sociology* vol. 29 no. 3 (2006): 373–386; Ayşe Betül Çelik and Adnan Çelik, "Ethnography and Politics in Turkey: Doing Fieldwork in Times of Authoritarianism," *Ethnography* vol. 18 no. 3 (2017): 312–329.