



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

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“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

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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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- The only exceptions known to me are the following texts: Kadhum 2025; Henry et al. 2024.
- This observation is confirmed even in Henry et al. 2024, 384.
- Personal communication of Memorial activists currently based in Europe with the author (December 2024; April 2025).
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