



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

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### 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.

**W**e 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In the face of these challenges, many environmental NGOs have adapted by relinquishing international funding, changing their names, or continuing their work informally.<sup>3</sup>

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 Law<sup>4</sup> and the Undesirable Organizations Law.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

Tarrow<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> This is frequently accompanied by symbolic actions by the state to emphasize the importance of environmental issues while simultaneously fostering patriotic sentiments of nature.<sup>10</sup> 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-building<sup>11</sup>. 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

Existing scholarship has largely interpreted these dynamics through the lens of shrinking civic space and repression.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Activists have adopted this rhetoric in Russia to align with state priorities while addressing local environmental concerns.<sup>17</sup> 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 in 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.<sup>18</sup> 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: KREMLIN.RU

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>**

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.<sup>21</sup>**

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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-activists<sup>26</sup>. 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".<sup>27</sup> 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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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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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

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.<sup>30</sup> 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**

**“EVEN BEFORE RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE, MANY ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS IN RUSSIA PRACTICED SELECTIVE DEPOLITICIZATION.”**

politics, our goal is to preserve nature, and we do not make political statements.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>**

**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.<sup>35</sup>**

**“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.<sup>36</sup>**

**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 discourse<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> By comparison, in 2020, two environmental activists received suspended sentences, while in 2021, eight activists were sentenced, three of whom received actual prison terms.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.**<sup>42</sup>

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 fines<sup>43</sup>. 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!”<sup>44</sup> “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.”<sup>45</sup> “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.”<sup>46</sup>

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.**<sup>47</sup>

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.**<sup>48</sup>

**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 culture<sup>49</sup>. 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!*"<sup>50</sup>. 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.**<sup>51</sup>

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.**<sup>52</sup>

**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"<sup>53</sup>. 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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup>

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!"<sup>56</sup>. 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.**<sup>57</sup> [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.<sup>58</sup> 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 issues<sup>59</sup>. 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> 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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