



## TIDAL WAVES OF WAR: HOW RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE IS AFFECTING LIVES, BORDERS, AND MOBILITY

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## The Tidal Waves of War: St. Petersburg Observations, EU Borders, and Eco-Settlers in the Balkans

Maria Tysiachniouk, University of Eastern Finland

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000705215

This special issue brings together sociological reflections and analyses shaped by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2022. Our contributors, scattered across St. Petersburg and other European cities, have shared their lived experiences, observations, and fieldwork findings. What connects these scholars is their transnational research, which has been deeply impacted by the war. Through weekly meetings and ongoing dialogue, these authors have explored the profound shifts in everyday life—involving war-related practices, borders, and mobility—as well as how societies cope with the transformations brought by war.

As the editor of this special issue, I conceptualize the war as a tidal wave—an unstoppable, destructive force that has sent shockwaves far beyond the immediate battlefield. Unlike natural disasters, war not only devastates, but also triggers unpredictable, long-term changes in both physical and conceptual spaces. Its ripple effects reach across national borders, reshaping geopolitical dynamics; provoking mass migration not only from Ukraine, but also from Russia; and altering daily life in cities such as St. Petersburg and Moscow that are hundreds of miles from the frontline. This issue examines these tidal shifts through four distinct yet interrelated essays, each of which offers unique insights into the sociological implications of the war.

### War and Life in St. Petersburg: Observations from the Ground

Two essays in this issue, by Olga Senina and Julia Dementienko, focus on life in St. Petersburg since the war began. Both authors draw attention to societal changes; shifts in everyday life; and the ways in which people navigate a reality dominated by repression, propaganda, and fear.

Olga Senina provides a comprehensive, data-based overview of public sentiment, emigration, and the harsh penalties imposed on those who dare protest. Her essay shows how the political regime enforces conformity, yet how resistance persists—often quietly and under the radar. Senina documents how dissent manifests through subtle sabotage and non-compliance with state directives. Her focus is on the invisible struggle between compliance and resistance, shedding light on how anti-war sentiments continue to simmer despite the government's authoritarian grip.

In contrast, Julia Dementienko emphasizes the adaptation and silence that have become commonplace in Russian society. Through her observations, Dementienko reveals the reluctance of ordinary citizens to engage with the war. Instead, whether out of fear, helplessness, or indifference, they choose to remain silent. Her essay paints a picture of a society where the visual presence of militaristic propaganda may have waned—symbols like the pro-war “Z” have faded—but the war's psychological and social imprint remains profound. Dementienko's essay captures the eerie sense of normalcy that pervades daily life in St. Petersburg even as war rages in Ukraine.

Both essays highlight the phenomenon of the “war of messages,” a battle fought not on the frontlines but in the public spaces of cities like St. Petersburg. At the start of the war, buildings were plastered with pro-war symbols, recruitment posters, and nationalist rhetoric. Yet by 2023, this militaristic imagery had largely receded from public view, reflecting perhaps a decline in popular support for the war. However, the shift does not signal the end of the conflict's impact on daily life. Rather, the war has seeped into the fabric of Russian society in more insidious ways. Senina and Dementienko offer nuanced perspectives on how war transforms public and private spaces—through repression, silent complicity, and the struggle to preserve a sense of normality in abnormal times.

### The War and Its Silent Discontents

In Senina's essay, readers will discover the subtle but persistent forms of resistance to the war. While state-sponsored narratives and public opinion polls suggest overwhelming support for Putin's military campaign, Senina challenges this assumption, offering a more complex and fractured view of Russian society. She draws on the concept of “weapons of the weak” to explain how ordinary citizens in St. Petersburg engage in everyday acts of defiance, such as anti-war graffiti, small-scale protests, and quiet sabotage. These acts, while seemingly minor, carry significant weight in a country where dissent can lead to severe punishment.

Dementienko's essay further explores this dynamic by analyzing the psychological and emotional toll of the war on Russian citizens. Through interviews and observations, she documents how many Russians have chosen

to disengage from the war altogether. The essay sheds light on how fear of repression and a sense of powerlessness have led to a collective silence: the war is neither seen nor discussed. This silence, however, speaks volumes about the psychological exhaustion and deeper societal transformation underway.

Both essays provide a vital window into Russian society's response to the war, revealing the tensions between public compliance and private dissent, between visible symbols of nationalism and quieter, more nuanced expressions of opposition. Through their analyses, Senina and Dementienko challenge the monolithic view of Russian public opinion and offer a more layered understanding of how war reshapes society from within.

### **War and Mobility: Disrupted Borders and Eco-Migrants in the Balkans**

The second set of essays in this special issue explores the war's impact on mobility, borders, and migration. Elena Nikiforova and Maria Tysiachniouk delve into the ways the war has disrupted transnational lives, creating new forms of mobility and displacement. These essays take readers beyond Russia's borders, examining how geopolitical shifts ripple through Europe, reshaping lives, communities, and connections.

Nikiforova's essay explores the geopolitical reconfiguration of Russia's borderlands, particularly the radical transformation of its relationship with Europe. Since the war began, Russia's symbolic and physical borders with Europe have shifted dramatically—from what was once a border-bridge facilitating transnational mobility to a border-barrier marked by sanctions, visa restrictions, and travel bans. Nikiforova details the emergence of a new "mobility (dis)order," in which the ease of crossing borders has been replaced by an archaic system of complex, expensive, and time-consuming travel routes. Through her analysis, readers will come to understand not only emergent practices of border crossing, but also how these structural shifts have affected thousands of transnational individuals who once moved freely between Russia and Europe.

Tysiachniouk's essay takes a different approach, focusing on the micro-level experiences of Russian eco-

migrants—those involved in the back-to-nature movement—who have relocated to the Balkans in search of more open and sustainable environments. Her study reveals how these individuals, deeply rooted in Russia's intentional communities and eco-villages, have adapted to life in Serbia and Montenegro. They bring with them not only a philosophy of sustainable living, but also practical knowledge of community-building and alternative education. Tysiachniouk's essay highlights the resilience and adaptability of these eco-migrants, who contribute to local initiatives while staying true to their values of environmental stewardship and self-sufficiency.

Through Nikiforova's and Tysiachniouk's essays, readers will see how war reshapes mobility through both physical barriers and the migration of ideas, practices, and communities. Nikiforova's analysis of borderland dynamics provides a macro-level understanding of the structural shifts in mobility, while Tysiachniouk's essay offers a more hopeful perspective on the possibilities of migration as a tool for global cooperation and environmental sustainability.

### **Concluding Reflections: The Far-Reaching Tides of War**

Together, these four essays provide a multifaceted exploration of how the Russian-Ukrainian war has reshaped borders, mobility, and daily life in both subtle and profound ways. From the streets of St. Petersburg to the borders of Europe and the eco-settlements of the Balkans, this special issue turns a unique sociological lens on the war's wide-ranging impacts. It examines not only the visible consequences of war—disrupted borders, political repression, and migration—but also the quieter, less obvious changes that unfold in everyday life.

As the war continues to evolve, so too will its effects on society, mobility, and identity. This special issue seeks to capture the complexity of these changes, offering readers a deeper understanding of how individuals and communities navigate a world transformed by conflict. Whether through resistance, adaptation, or migration, the essays collected here show how people respond to war's tidal waves, finding ways to cope, resist, and, in some cases, rebuild.

## European–Russian (Shattered) Neighborhood and the New Mobility (Dis)Order

Elena Nikiforova (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000705215

### Abstract

This article examines the changes in the international mobility regime between Europe and Russia, which have affected thousands of people leading a transnational lifestyle. Sanctions that impede the movement of people between Russia and Europe have destroyed the previous structures and routes of mobility and created a new mobility (dis)order. I invite the reader on a journey along the Russian borderland from Norway to Estonia, examining the structural conditions and properties of the new mobility (dis)order and its manifestations in this territory, which is experiencing the effects of the new disorder in the most concentrated form.

The outbreak of war, or the “special military operation,” as it is referred to in Russia, reconfigured Russia’s geographic and conceptual space. The country ostensibly expanded by four federal subjects, while its relations with international partners, particularly Europe, shifted dramatically. What was once a border bridge with Europe transformed into a border barrier, marking the start of a trend toward Russia’s “de-Europeanization,” driven from both within and without.

Sanctions have created many barriers, especially when it comes to international mobility. The suspension of direct air travel between Europe and Russia in February 2022 forced travelers to rely on longer, more difficult transit routes, reviving an archaic travel regime. The suspension of simplified Schengen visa procedures and the imposition of bans on entry by land or by cars with Russian plates have further isolated Russia from its European neighbors. This new territorial disconnection culminated in the closure of checkpoints on the Finnish–Russian border in fall 2023, ending cross-border life—which had once seemed unstoppable.

The new mobility (dis)order has disrupted the European part of Russia, especially in borderlands from Norway to Lithuania, where ties with Europe had been strongest. In this text, I invite the reader on a journey along the Russian borderlands, examining the conditions of this new mobility (dis)order and the strategies people use to cope with its challenges.

### European–Russian Neighborhood and Border as a Bridge

Our focus is on Russia’s border with Norway, Finland, and Estonia. While united by geography, their histories and relations with Russia differ significantly. Norway was never part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, unlike Finland and Estonia, whose experiences of being part of the Empire (Finland before 1917, and Estonia at different points in history, with the first period of independence between the two World Wars) and

memory thereof undoubtedly shape both their past and present relations with Russia. At the same time, Norway is a long-standing NATO member but not a member of the EU, while Finland and Estonia have been members of the European Union since 1995 and 2004, respectively. Both countries have also been NATO members for some time—Estonia since 2004 and Finland since 2023.

Despite historical differences, over the past thirty years, relations with these countries generally trended toward cooperation and partnership. From the early 1990s to 2014, cross-border cooperation was a key driver of development in northwestern Russia. Good-neighborliness formed the basis of state and regional policies, resulting in numerous projects, cross-border trade, and tourism.

In northern Norway, the Sør Varanger municipality exemplified successful cooperation. Its proximity to Russia (15 km from Kirkenes) made it easier to do business with Russia than with other Norwegian regions. This relationship was reflected in cultural events like the Barents Spectacle festival and the recognition of the Red Army’s role in liberating northern Norway in 1944. While competition for Arctic resources added complexity, the Barents region emerged as a space of both cooperation and rivalry. A visa-free agreement for border residents, introduced in 2012, further strengthened cross-border connections, with around 400 Russians now living in Kirkenes, a town of 3,500 people.

A similar dynamic developed on the Finnish–Russian border, although the context was different. The Winter War (1939) led Finland to lose 10% of its territory to the USSR, a trauma that still influences Finnish views of Russia. Nonetheless, cooperation flourished from the 1990s, supported by cross-border programs and infrastructure projects. Finnish consulates, churches, and humanitarian organizations in Russian border regions fostered relationships, while nostalgic tours by former Finnish residents to ancestral lands in Russia helped build personal connections.

Starting in the early 2000s, Russian tourism to Finland surged, thanks to easy access from St. Petersburg and favorable visa conditions. Cities like Imatra and Lappeenranta responded by expanding shopping and hospitality infrastructure. A boom in Russian purchases of real estate near the border only deepened the interconnectedness of the region.

### European–Russian Neighborhood: Border as Barrier

September 2024. I am in Imatra on a business visit and living in a house belonging to a family from St. Petersburg, where our mutual friend has put me up. According to Google Maps, the checkpoint on the border with Russia is 5 km from the house—a walk of less than an hour. By car, it was once possible to cover the distance from here to St. Petersburg in two and a half hours. In September 2024, however, this geographical proximity comes as something of a shock: the entire length of the border between Finland and Russia has been closed since November 2023, making Russia’s proximity somewhat theoretical for those wishing to visit it or travel from it to Finland.

The same Google map gives the current fastest route by car from a house in Imatra to St. Petersburg as a giant loop of 972 km: the route runs from Imatra to Helsinki, across the sea by ferry to Tallinn, from Tallinn through the Koidula–Kunichina Gora checkpoint near Pechory at the southern end of the Estonian–Russian border, and from there to St. Petersburg. According to the navigator, the route, which previously took about three hours, will now take 15, but in practice, it will be much longer—the time to cross the Estonian–Russian border is unpredictable, and calculating this time is beyond Google’s capabilities.

The distances that travelers between Europe and Russia have to cover, which have increased by orders of magnitude, and the complete geographical illogicality but technical necessity and political determinacy of branching and winding routes are an important property of the new mobility (dis)order. In addition to long distances, Russia–Europe travel, which in most cases involves transit routes, is now characterized by unpredictable duration and complex temporality. This temporality consists of the actual travel time on different modes of transport, the time spent waiting for the next transport, overnight stays at transfer points, and the time spent crossing the border. The last parameter is the main unknown in this equation, and can be anything from a few minutes to many hours—or even days—of standing at the border. The inability to calculate travel time and the chance of getting stuck in a tedious wait at the border when choosing a land route pushes people to travel along previously unthink-

able routes, such as flying from Helsinki to St. Petersburg via Istanbul (as a reminder, until March 2022, the high-speed Allegro train ran between the Finnish and Russian cities, a journey of three and a half hours) or traveling through the far north and the Norwegian–Russian border, where it is known that there are no queues.

Compared to pre-war times, European borders as an institution for sorting travelers on the basis of Russian citizenship have acquired unprecedented complexity and multidimensionality. On August 31, 2022, EU foreign ministers agreed on the suspension of the simplified visa regime for Russian citizens, which had been in force since 2007, and each country received the right to independently determine Russians’ level of access to the Schengen area across their borders. In September 2022, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Finland introduced a ban on the entry of Russian citizens with Schengen visas for travel and leisure (non-essential travel). Only holders of second passports, in addition to the Russian one, or residence permits in Europe can enter these countries from Russia by land, while entry with a visa is possible only for immediate relatives of citizens of these countries with the necessary documents. The definition of “immediate family” also varies from country to country. Norway, being a signatory of the Schengen Agreement but not a member of the EU, maintained a special position for two years and kept its land border crossing Storskog, near Kirkenes, open to holders of tourist visas, but in May 2024 this Arctic gateway also closed. Now, all land border posts from Norway to Kaliningrad work highly selectively, letting people in only on special grounds. Crossing back from Europe to Russia, on the other hand, is technically allowed for all; however, a Russian citizen with a second passport or a residence permit may be questioned by the Russian side.

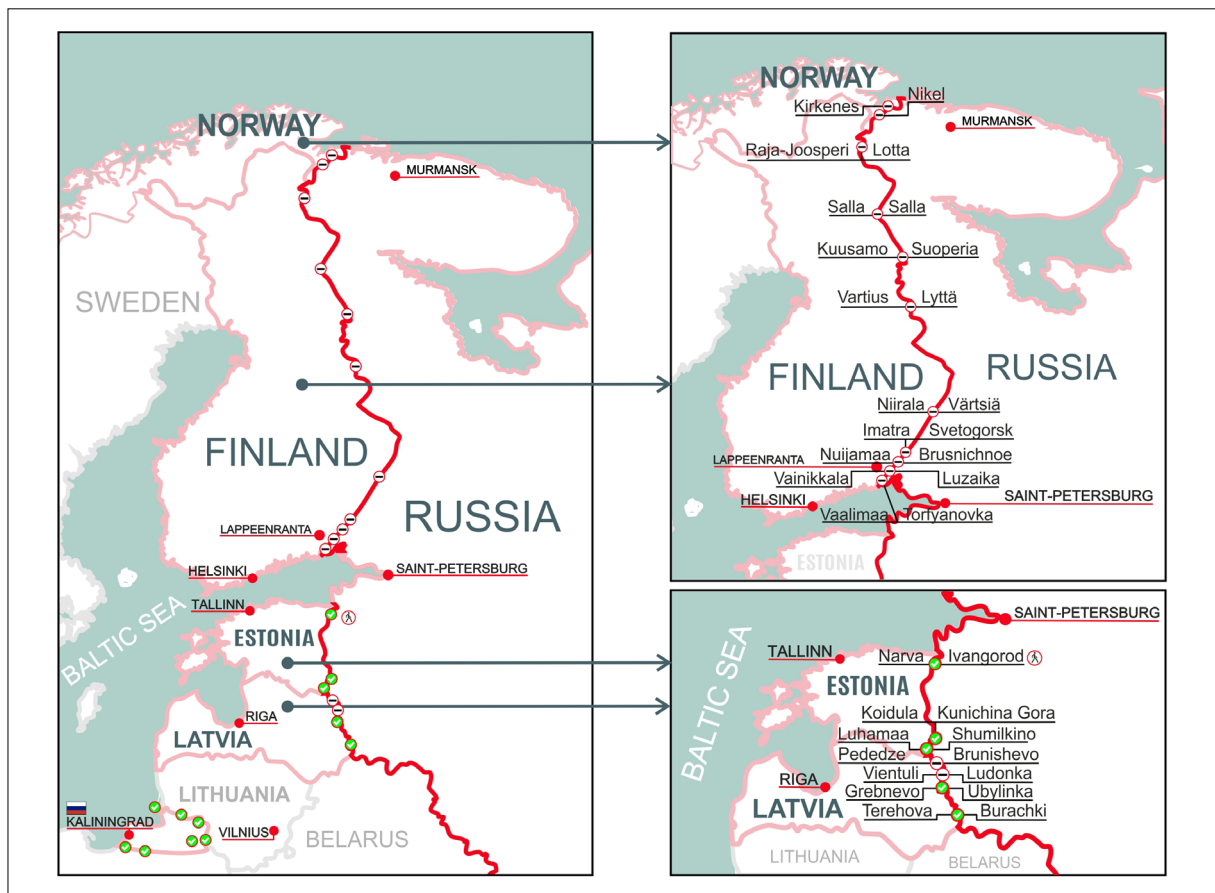
**Figure 1** (see Figure 1 on p. 6) represents the Europe–Russia cross-border mobility map for Fall 2024, showing the now closed and open cross-border paths with “no-go” signs and “green light” indicators, respectively. However, while “no-go” has a single, clear meaning, the “green light” conceals a vast array of state-specific bordering practices that vary from site to site, along with people’s coping tactics, which include transportation options, travel hacks, and grounded, often real-time knowledge of how each specific border crossing point operates in practice. This tacit knowledge is accumulated and exchanged through designated Telegram channels and Facebook groups, which have become a fundamentally new, grassroots-generated mobility infrastructure, tailored to help people navigate the complexity and unpredictability of the current mobility (dis)order.

### Europe–Russia Neighborhood: Border Crossing Points, Open and Closed (Oct 2024)

The impossibility of getting from Russia to Europe by land without sufficient grounds created difficulties for everyone, but hit a group of property owners in Russia’s closest foreign neighbors, Finland and Estonia, especially hard. Owning property in these countries is not a basis for obtaining a residence permit, but favorable visa policies for Russians previously allowed them to visit their second homes without visa-related complications. Transborder mobility turbulence began after 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, then the border closure due to the pandemic became a black swan for owners. In 2022, however, against the backdrop of the nascent war, pandemic-era restrictions came to look like a piece of cake. The border is either closed completely (Finland) or will not let the owner through with a visa (Estonia). Moving to Finland via Norway represented a temporary workaround, but Russian citizens can now only get from Russia to their dachas in Imatra via a complicated transit route that goes beyond the imaginable geography and costs. The house I live in in Imatra has been separated from its owners since 2019, given the pandemic,

and its future is unclear. There are many such houses and apartments all over the border areas of Finland and Estonia; the Russian owners cannot get to the houses to pay their bills and local news reports on various measures against them, as well as an unprecedented drop in real estate prices in these areas. As a visitor, I can testify to the unusual silence and emptiness in Imatra, which used to be very lively thanks to shopping tourists from Russia. In the middle of the day, the city center, where the shops used to be, is empty; all the shops are closed. The huge hangar-type shops near the border closed during the pandemic and never reopened, including the ambitious outlet village Tsar, the construction of which was completed in 2019. The Allegro train, which at one time represented the crowning glory of the transport infrastructure connecting Helsinki and St. Petersburg, made its last trip in March 2022 and was written off. With the exception of the embassy in Moscow, all diplomatic missions of Finland in Russia have long since been closed. The closure of the Consulate General in St. Petersburg drew a sad line under an entire era in which St. Petersburg was rightfully an integral part of the European space. Now, the city, disconnected from the European

Figure 1: Border Crossings Between Russia and Western Europe.



Source: Designed by Alexandra Orlova and Sofia Beloshitskaya

infrastructure, is being turned into a kind of “domestic Europe” that serves the needs of domestic tourism. Vyborg, a now-Russian but formerly Finnish city with European architecture located close to the border, is also experiencing a tourism boom, taking over the role previously played by Helsinki, Tallinn, and other European cities in the neighborhood.

### **Zooming In and Out: The Estonian–Russian Border**

Whereas on the border with Finland, the town of Imatra is quiet, the spacious highways are empty, and the giant shopping malls stand like abandoned spaceships on an alien planet, further south, on the borders with the Baltic states, it is very lively. This is especially true of Narva–Ivangorod on the Estonian border. With the closure of the Finnish border, the Narva–Ivangorod checkpoint became the primary route to Europe for European Russians—not only those who live in Narva, a city on the border, and nearby cities in the North-East of Estonia and have historically used this checkpoint, but also all those Russian residents of Finland and other European countries for whom flying to Tallinn and crossing the border in Narva seems a better solution than taking a plane to Istanbul, Yerevan, or other third countries that allow Russians to enter.

In Estonia alone, there are about 315,000 ethnic Russians, or 24% of the total population, of whom 85,500 are Russian citizens with visa-free travel to Russia. In Finland, the Russian-speaking diaspora is more than 84,000 people (2022), of which about 38,000 have dual Finnish–Russian citizenship. If we imagine that many of these individuals have relatives in Russia, then a huge number of people living in Estonia and Finland alone may need to go to Russia, not to mention those living in other European countries.

One difficulty is that from February 1, 2024, the Narva–Ivangorod checkpoint has been accessible exclusively to pedestrians: the Russian side started repairing the automobile infrastructure, and the Estonian border, instead of working around the clock, switched to working from 7am to 11pm. As a result, the Narva–Ivangorod checkpoint, as the most obvious checkpoint on the border, as well as the closest to the Tallinn airport and St. Petersburg, has turned into a bottleneck, with hours-long queues in both directions and sometimes an overnight stay in the middle of the border bridge for those who manage to leave Russia but not to cross into Estonia before 11pm. Stories about standing in line for hours in the heat or rain, sleeping on the street so as not to lose one’s place in the queue and be the first to get through at 7am, or making lists of names—for a person familiar with Soviet practices, this looks like a flashback, a bad dream from the past.

And, just as in Soviet times, the reason for the queue is a shortage, if not of goods, then of freedoms—in this case, freedom of movement. Thus, the gap in space goes hand in hand with a gap in time, with a return to a reality that once appeared to have been consigned to the distant past.

The queue in Narva is a telling sign of the times and a social, even socio-spatial phenomenon worthy of a separate study. Here, I will note its most striking aspects. First of all, in the queue, two intersecting flows—local and global—meet, and not always without conflict. Travelers from afar, who have come here solely for the purpose of crossing, may not know that before the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of the Estonian border in 1991, Narva and Ivangorod lived as one city, and trips from Narva to Ivangorod and back are determined by personal connections—relatives on the other side, property, and so on. In addition, Narva is not the most economically prosperous city in Estonia, and for many locals, the petty trade typical of the border is a significant source of informal income. In other words, for some locals, crossing to the other side is an embedded everyday practice—this is their domestic crossing point, and the influx of visitors is a serious inconvenience. Locals cope with this with the help of informality, taking a place in line for each other and suddenly causing the queue to unexpectedly grow several times, which causes great discontent among visitors who cannot do likewise. In addition, places at the beginning of the line have now become an object of trade and a source of additional income for locals.

All in all, in the two and a half years since the start of the war, the density and vectors of social dynamics in the Russian–European neighborhood have undergone significant changes. The space of official cooperation has been reduced to zero, and communication with the other side, if it remains at all, is through personal contacts. For many involved for decades in the integration of the European–Russian neighborhood, the current rupture is a personal drama, and I often see activists of cross-border cooperation from both sides sending each other greetings and hopes for better times on social networks. In parallel with the curtailment of cross-border activity at the local level, there has been a rapid integration of the borderlands into global processes and, in particular, into the Europe–Russia transport routes. The development of the borderland’s function as a place of transit for people causes significant changes in border localities, influencing various spheres: the hotel business, transport, and the informal economy. There is a war going on. But life goes on too. People need to go, and they go, despite the difficulties of the journey and the anxiety of the situation in Russia.

### About the Author

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## ANALYSIS

### Invisible Conflict: The War Russia Tries to Ignore

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000705215

The article discusses how the war with Ukraine is gradually becoming normalized within Russia, with Russian citizens, unable to find opportunities to engage in public life, trying to live as if oblivious to the ongoing events. It also explores how this situation is experienced by the anti-war segment of society.

Times of change are akin to shifting seasons, with the people living through them preparing to inhabit a different world. This was the sentiment shared by anti-military Russian citizens as they surveyed their country and the streets of their cities after February 24, 2024—an awareness that everything would be irrevocably altered.

The surge of military propaganda—images emblazoned with symbols of invasion and militarism—seemed to affirm this belief, transforming the country into one defined by military aggression. A symbolic war of messages erupted on the walls of St. Petersburg: graffiti adorned with the pro-war “Z” symbol was met with defacement by those proclaiming “No to war.” Some individuals donned clothing featuring pro-war symbols, striding confidently down the street, while others discreetly affixed to fences small protest stickers bearing messages like “We are not his private army” and “Everyone loses in war.” Yet this symbolic struggle was often subtle and nearly invisible; one had to look closely to detect the signs and the clash of ideas beneath the surface.

Against this backdrop, the apparent prosperity of Russian cities and their inhabitants was strikingly visible. On the streets, it seemed as though nothing had changed: bustling restaurants were filled with people, music and dancing thrived, and the streets remained meticulously maintained. Intellectual life in St. Petersburg persevered despite the exodus of scholars, artists, lecturers, and journalists, continuing almost as if nothing had transpired. This dissonance struck even the intellectuals themselves as odd. After a brief period of shock, daily life resumed its routine, and community members collectively endeavored to erase the signs of war from their surroundings, as well as from their thoughts and conversations (see Figure 1 on p. 11).

Since May 2022, a group of social researchers in St. Petersburg has convened weekly to share observations on how society has been changing at the everyday level since the full-scale invasion, documenting their findings in a collective journal. One recurring theme has been the manifestation of the ongoing war in public spaces—and how both residents of Russian cities



and foreign visitors experience this aspect of daily life. In this article, I will explore this theme.

### Talking and Staying Silent About the War

Shortly after the invasion of Ukraine began, Russian cities were plastered with posters featuring the letter “Z.” Initially used to mark Russian army vehicles in Ukraine, it quickly became a symbol of Russian military aggression. In St. Petersburg, it appeared everywhere: on public transport, billboards, and even police cars. Local authorities decorated the city’s main streets with national emblems and military insignia, creating a stifling atmosphere for those appalled by the government’s actions. A small but visible segment of residents proudly wore clothing adorned with the “Z” symbol or attached St. George’s ribbons to their attire, signaling their support for the war and their conviction that Russia had the right to use violence. When these people crossed my path on the street, I could not help but feel as though they were small, symbolic tanks, ready to strike—despite the fact they never even looked at me.

The omnipresence of these symbols served a clear purpose: to foster national pride, create a sense of in-group solidarity amid conflict, and evoke imperial nostalgia (with the main avenues of St. Petersburg decorated with Russian imperial iconography). Yet while the authorities worked to evoke this abstract pride, they also took great pains to ensure that ordinary Russians remained largely unaware of the realities of the war. Refugees from Ukraine, many of whom volunteers in St. Petersburg helped to transit to Europe, often shared their astonishment at the disconnect. In May 2022, a group of Ukrainian refugees rode to the train station in a taxi with one of the members of our research group. When the news came on the car radio, the refugees, who had just escaped the bombings, braced themselves to hear reports about the devastation they had witnessed firsthand. Instead, they heard nothing about the war. The news was filled with mundane updates on the ordinary events taking place in this large country, as though Russian forces weren’t assaulting Ukrainian cities and villages, and as though Russian citizens weren’t dying on the battlefield. There was no mention of war at all. Shocked by this silence, one of the refugees turned to the volunteer and remarked, “Olya, Russians don’t even know what’s happening in Ukraine.”

As the war dragged on without delivering the swift victory the Russian government had likely envisioned, the desire of the city authorities and the general public alike to align themselves with the invasion began to wane. By 2023, the flood of pro-war symbols had visibly receded. By the summer of that year, the only remaining reminders of the ongoing conflict

in St. Petersburg were slickly designed recruitment posters encouraging enlistment in the army, with large salaries as their most prominent feature. These advertisements blended seamlessly into the consumer culture of the city, indistinguishable from other ads selling luxury goods or everyday comforts. The slogan “Join your folks” evoked a sense of belonging and warmth, subtly presenting military service as just another life choice—no different from buying yogurt or perfume. The posters conspicuously avoided any mention of what enlisting would truly entail, masking the brutal realities of war behind promises of financial gain and camaraderie.

### “If There’s a War Over There, Things Should Be Bad Here Too”

The war has tightly woven Russia and Ukraine into a shared narrative, and many observers anticipated that Ukraine’s suffering would inevitably leave a visible mark on daily life in Russia, through either increased militarism or a growing sense of fear. In the summer of 2023, Ukrainian drone strikes reached Moscow, resulting in airport closures and flight cancellations for several hours each day. Despite these direct threats, Russian citizens—stripped of political agency—continued to normalize and “neutralize” the war in their daily routines. Faced with an evil they were powerless to stop or influence, they found themselves in a situation that was detrimental to psychological well-being, both individually and collectively.

Russians returning from abroad often expressed astonishment at the absence of visible signs of war in their homeland. They were struck by the stark contrast between the way the war dominated discourse in other countries and the near-invisibility of the conflict in Russia itself. Russian social researchers living in Europe found themselves deeply immersed in the war’s impact, and when they returned to Russia, they expected this intense focus to be even more palpable. Instead, they encountered a strange disconnect, as if, in the minds of Russians, “the war doesn’t exist at all.”

A former Russian professor, now a professor in London, shared with a colleague in St. Petersburg her observations, which were recorded in their collective journal in November 2023: “She was in Moscow and was amazed at how nothing seemed to be happening. In England, everyone is deeply involved—there are Ukrainian students, sanctions, and cancel culture. But here in Moscow, people are eating, drinking, enjoying life, going to theatres. Moscow is completely indifferent to the war. She was absolutely astonished. As an outsider, she expected a gloomy atmosphere, aggression, or something else. But she didn’t see any signs of war and was shocked that life was going on as usual.”

Another colleague was similarly surprised by the number of celebrations and feasts taking place in both St. Petersburg and Moscow, describing the atmosphere as “a feast amidst a plague.”

In Crimea, a region long steeped in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the visual signs of militarization were much more pronounced. A social researcher from the collective journal group noted this contrast during the summer of 2023. “On the one hand, life in Crimea felt just as calm and steady as in other parts of Russia,” she observed. “But on the other hand, there were far more signs of the war. Propaganda posters were everywhere. When I visited Russia in September 2022, I didn’t get the impression of militarization that I had expected from living in Europe. But when I went to Kerch in March 2023, it was everywhere. Posters with ‘Z’ lined the main streets and city buses, and there were constant slogans like ‘We Don’t Abandon Our People.’ On the Crimean Bridge, ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols were omnipresent, and people were even taking photos with them. So, in that sense, the war is visible, but otherwise, people live their lives.”

The unfulfilled expectations of a societal collapse in Russia surprised many and provided an unexpected sense of relief. People began to think, “We’re not living such a bad life after all.” This created cognitive dissonance for anti-war Russians: “We are living in the midst of such horror, experiencing an apocalypse, and yet people are doing well.” The expectation that if war was happening “over there,” things should be bad “here” too remained unfulfilled, deepening the sense of disorientation.

One journal entry, from January 2024, recounted a gathering of lower-middle-class Russians—teachers, doctors, and music instructors—at a party in St. Petersburg. An anti-war social researcher attended with some apprehension, knowing that many of the guests supported the invasion. To her surprise, however, no one brought up the war. Conversations that once included approving remarks about the invasion had fallen into complete silence. Reflecting on the event, the researcher wrote, “It feels like everyone is now afraid and trying to suppress the topic of war. This is not just exhaustion but seems to be linked to deeper fears. One of the staunchest patriots, a schoolteacher who always used to talk about hating America, even told me this time that young people should go abroad for education and work. She said, ‘Of course, I love Russia, but it’s better for you to leave.’ I was astonished.” Even though the war was

not openly discussed, it remained present in people’s minds, subtly influencing their views and decisions.

By autumn 2024, this silence around the war had only deepened. The topic had all but vanished from daily conversations, along with any talk of the future. The latest ethnographic study of Russian attitudes, conducted by the Laboratory of Public Sociology, revealed that while many Russians were hopeful for the war’s end, they made great efforts to ignore its existence in the present. The war was distant—both geographically and mentally—and the collective response was one of avoidance.

## Conclusions

The experiences and observations collected in this essay reveal the stark contrast between the visible and invisible impact of war on Russian society. While Ukraine faces the direct consequences of Russian aggression, with its cities destroyed and its population’s lives upended, the war has remained largely out of sight for many Russians. Visual symbols of militarism, such as the “Z” sign, once plastered across public spaces, faded in prominence by 2023. Instead, life in Russian cities—particularly in cultural hubs like St. Petersburg and Moscow—continues with a sense of normalcy that surprises both outsiders and returning expatriates. This normalcy, however, is precarious and built on a foundation of silence, fear, and cognitive dissonance.

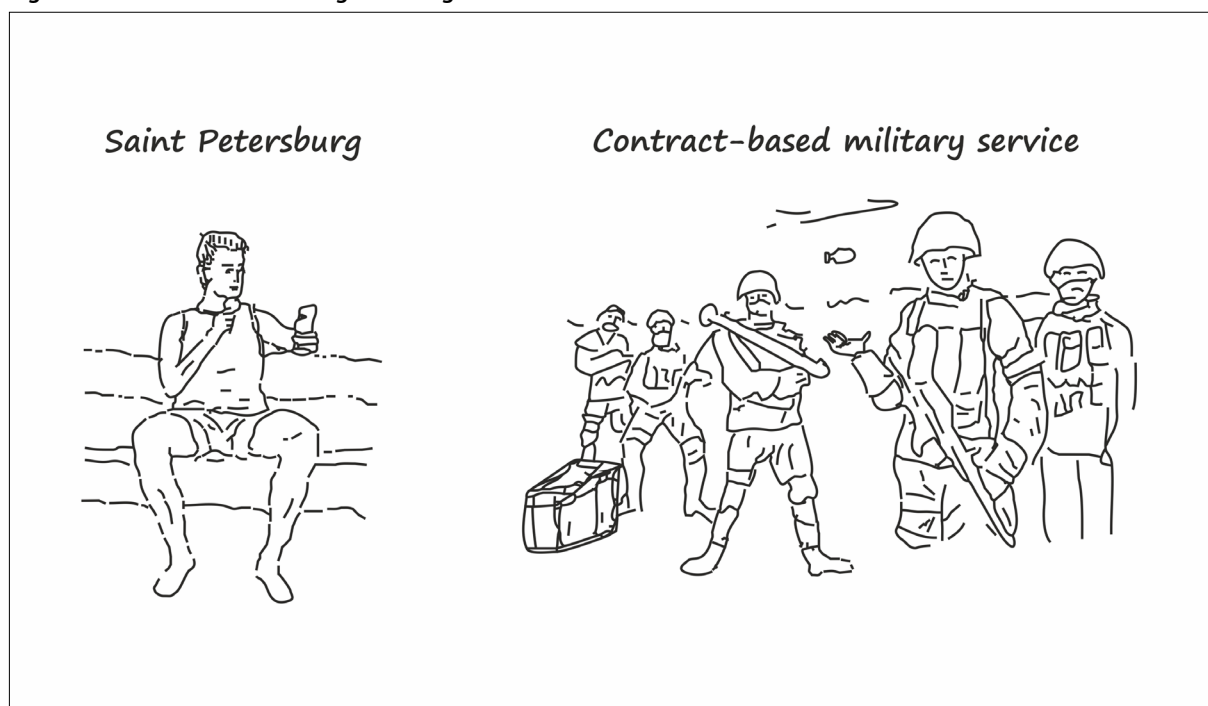
This essay highlights how the lack of visible signs of war within Russia has led to a psychological disconnect for many Russians, especially those who oppose the invasion. They find themselves in a society that outwardly rejects the reality of the war, suppressing conversations and diverting attention to everyday comforts. This widespread normalization of the conflict, coupled with the absence of political agency among ordinary citizens, has contributed to a collective psychological defense mechanism—a societal attempt to neutralize the war in the public sphere. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates that while the war may not be visible in daily Russian life, its shadow looms large in the silence that surrounds it. Russians, hopeful for its end but unwilling or unable to confront it, continue to live in a state of suspended reality. The absence of a clear moral reckoning with the conflict leaves society vulnerable to further internal and external shocks, as the unresolved tension between the war’s existence and its invisibility continues to shape the collective psyche.

### *About the Author*

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**Figure 1: The War St. Petersburg Tries to Ignore.**

Source: Line drawing by Alexandra Orlova.

## “Weapons of the Weak”: An Ethnography of Urban Everyday Life During the War on Ukraine

Olga Senina, independent researcher

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000705215

This essay explores subtle forms of anti-war resistance in Russia, focusing on opposition-minded citizens since the invasion of Ukraine. Despite widespread repression and laws criminalizing dissent, some citizens continue to resist through “quiet” protests, such as sabotage, Aesopian language, and doublethink. The essay highlights how public discussions about the war have shifted to private conversations, with criticism framed through humanitarian rather than political lenses. Drawing on observations in St. Petersburg, the text illustrates how everyday acts of defiance challenge the dominant pro-war narrative in a society where public dissent can lead to severe consequences.

Since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, public opinion polls have shown overwhelming support from the majority of Russians for national leader Putin and his policies. According to the Public Opinion Foundation, which conducts large-scale national surveys in Russia, “after the announcement of the special military operation, the majority of Russians supported this decision—65%, and a year later, this figure increased to 68% and remains the same in 2024” (WCIOM 2024). Of course, these polls cannot be fully trusted due to methodological issues that allow for manipulation of the data. Moreover, such polls are influenced by respondents’ fear of giving the “wrong” answer. Nevertheless, they partially reflect the real attitude of Russians toward the war, and many people do indeed support military actions in Ukraine. Still, even these polls show that one-third of the population disagrees with the government’s actions.

Many of those who disagreed left Russia in the spring of 2022 when the war began. A second wave of departures was triggered by military mobilization in the fall of 2022. According to various estimates, up to 600,000 people have left Russia. However, there are still many opposition-minded people in Russia, even though repressions against anyone expressing alternative political views are actively unfolding. Just days after the start of the so-called “special military operation,” new laws were introduced to Russia’s legal system that imposed administrative and criminal liability for knowingly spreading publicly false information about the use of armed forces (so-called “fake news,” Article 207.3) and for public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the armed forces (Article 280.3). These laws are designed to ban any publicly critical statements regarding the war in Ukraine. No matter how peaceful their intent, such publications—or even comments on social media—can lead to imprisonment for up to 10 years. In the first eight months of the war, about 4,800 cases of discrediting the Russian army were brought to Russian courts. As a result of legal proceedings, 4,439 people were fined

a total of 151 million rubles in 2022, and 2,353 people were fined a total of 76.5 million rubles in 2023 (TASS 2024). Over two years, more than 130 people in Russia have been sentenced to prison under the articles for spreading false information about the armed forces or actions aimed at discrediting them (same source).

Despite the ban on public statements and the harsh repressions that accompany them, people continue to speak out against the war. This essay presents observations made from February 2022 to the present in St. Petersburg, looking at how the war is changing everyday life in the city. The focus is on the quiet resistance of opposition-minded citizens who, due to the restrictions, cannot speak out loudly but still try to express their position in one way or another.

About a year ago, a colleague and I had to travel to Moscow for a week for work. On the train ride home, we shared our impressions of the “capital at war.” My colleague, who holds anti-war views, spoke bitterly about what she saw. She was upset by the large amount of visual propaganda: billboards calling for military contract service; the abundance of national symbols and the letter “Z” on buildings and cars; the presence of people in military uniforms; and, most of all, the heavy atmosphere. In her view, it combined a hidden mutual aggression and distrust between people, on the one hand, and life going on “as if nothing was happening,” on the other hand.

My impressions were somewhat different. I was trying to find something positive for someone who does not accept war in any form. And so I saw not only the ubiquitous “Z” symbols or soldiers, but also some subtle messages. For example, on the most prominent and accessible shelf of one bookstore were books that essentially served as opposition statements—Lev Tolstoy’s book on the philosophy of nonviolence, Orwell’s *1984*, and others. From a random book I picked up to browse in that store, a sticker with a crossed-out rifle fell out. In one of the central art museums, there was an exhibi-

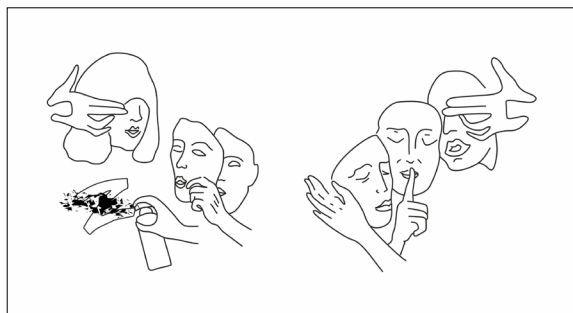
bition about the dialogue between Russian and Western Impressionists; the very existence of this exhibition defied the widespread culture of mutual “cancellation” between Russia and Western countries that began after Russia’s military actions in Ukraine. But what pleased me most was a small “peace” symbol—the international symbol of peace—etched on a bus stop. All of these signs and messages indicated that anti-war expressions exist in public spaces. They may not be loud or always noticeable, but they are there. Even in an environment of fear and repression, people are trying to express their position. These expressions make it clear that there is no unanimous support for Putin’s aggressive policies and the government’s actions among Russians. People are turning to whatever means of resistance remain available to them. It is important to learn to see these forms of resistance and “quiet” protest statements against the backdrop of the dominant, loud, and intrusive national grand narrative, which is visible from afar, while signs of resistance are often impossible to notice unless you are “inside.”

In what follows, I will describe the resistance that I have observed among opposition-minded residents of St. Petersburg since the start of the war, cowardly called a “special military operation” by the authorities.

### Practices of Sabotage

I believe that the “quiet” resistance currently observed in modern Russia can be described as the “weapons of the weak.” This term was introduced by political scientist and anthropologist James Scott to describe everyday, often unnoticed forms of resistance against the state, such as sabotage, delays, evasion, and more. These practices can undoubtedly be observed in Russia today (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: An Ethnography of Urban Everyday Life.**



Source: Live drawing by Alexandra Orlova.

Many examples of sabotage were seen during the mobilization efforts in the fall of 2022. Those who were subject to mobilization tried to avoid receiving their draft notices “in person.” According to the law, once a draft notice is handed over personally, a person who fails to report to the military office is considered a deserter,

and administrative or even criminal penalties can be imposed. As a result, draft notices requiring individuals to report to the military office were delivered to homes. Government employees were enlisted for this task, as the military could not handle the workload. A social worker who was involved in this effort told me that she and a colleague would enter apartment buildings, wait inside for 5–10 minutes to give the appearance that they were going door-to-door, and then report to their superiors that no one was home. In reality, this practice was an act of sabotage against the mobilization effort. The woman explained that she did not want to “hand over our boys and men to them.” In this context, “them” refers to the Hobbesian Leviathan—the Russian state, which is forcing men to go to war. This was not an isolated story.

Similar acts of sabotage have repeatedly been observed among government employees working in various sectors, who, since the start of the war, have regularly been forced to take actions in support of the state—whether through “voluntary” participation in pro-war rallies or making the “right choice” during elections. People resist by ignoring orders from their superiors, feigning compliance, and reporting fake evidence and documents. For example, I have seen many people take photographs in front of the pavilion of the “Russia—My History” exhibition. They were forced to attend for “patriotic education” and to foster a “correct understanding of Russian history,” and the photograph was needed to prove to their superiors that they had visited the exhibition. However, the participants of this sabotage never even entered the exhibition; they merely posed for photos in front of it.

### Public Anti-War Statements in the City

Acts of resistance can also include “quiet” public protest expressions, which I observed in St. Petersburg and recorded in my research journal. With the start of the war, the city became saturated with military symbols. Most notably, posters calling for enlistment in military contract service were displayed all over the city. It is important to note that these posters clearly reflect the economic motives behind recruitment for the war. Over the two and a half years of the war, these posters have appealed to various moral foundations. Initially, they focused on solidarity with “our own”—Russians in Ukraine—urging people to help them. The slogan “We don’t abandon our own” played on the name of the war—“special military operation.” Later, the posters called on men to take on a “man’s job”—to fight. Here, the idea of rugged masculinity was highlighted. Recently, I saw a poster stating, “We need victory.” This message carries connotations that echo the legacy of victory in the Great Patriotic War and World War II. However, these

moral justifications for mobilization are not as significant as the primary text on each poster—the amount of money one can earn by going to war. These sums greatly exceed the average salary in Russia and continue to rise. The moral aspect of the campaign becomes somewhat overshadowed by the numbers printed in the largest font.

Initially, protests took the form of defacing the posters calling for military contract service, with anti-war messages or drawings added. For instance, the phrase “Join your own” was often completed with a drawing of a freshly dug grave, implying that people die in war and that “your own” refers to those who have died in combat.

The same happened with the letter “Z.” Originally borrowed from Russian military use for marking equipment, the letter became a key symbol in state military propaganda at the start of the war, appearing on buildings, being used in flash mobs, and more. Pro-war activists adopted the symbol, using it on clothing or cars to express their political stance and support for the war effort. By early 2023, however, the “Z” symbol began losing popularity, with its use mainly limited to the most radical war supporters. However, in the spring of 2022, from the window of my home, I witnessed a battle between pro-war and anti-war activists, with one group painting the letter “Z” on the building opposite and others crossing it out or covering it. For a couple of weeks, the graffiti on the building changed regularly. This civil confrontation spilled onto the walls of buildings and was evident in this “war of images.”

Over time, such obvious protests almost disappeared, as it became too dangerous to deface posters or cross out the letter “Z” in public spaces. Nevertheless, I still see small stickers in the city with messages like “No to war!” or drawings of peace symbols. These inscriptions and drawings have become smaller and have moved away from the main streets—they can now be found in courtyards or on abandoned buildings. Yet they persist. Just a couple of weeks before writing this text, I saw a chalk inscription that read: “No to war. Don’t go kill and die!” The message was written on an abandoned bridge that still sees regular foot traffic.

### “Aesopian Language” of Anti-War Artistic Works

Protest statements are evident in the cultural industries. With the onset of the war, a mutual policy of “cancellation” began in the cultural sphere. For instance, in bookstores, books by many authors who had spoken critically about Russia’s policies in Ukraine and had gone abroad were first masked—by being sold in packaging—and later outright banned. The names of authors labeled as “foreign agents” disappeared from theater and music posters. Later, criminal prosecution of disfavored cultural figures began, with several people receiving

prison sentences. Nevertheless, the cultural industries continue to produce anti-war statements. This is especially noticeable in the theatrical arts. Some theaters have included in their repertoire performances based on anti-war scripts, which, while not necessarily dedicated to the current war, reflect the attitude toward today’s conflict through the experiences and emotions of other wars. Even if the repertoire is not updated, new elements may be introduced into productions to address “pressing issues.” For example, in one performance based on Russian classics, the theme of the destructive power of drones was introduced. Another theater studio staged a play focused on a chapter of Russian history—the struggle of the Narodniks (representatives of a socio-political movement from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century advocating for societal reforms based on socialist principles) against monarchy. The emphasis in the play was on the struggle against the state and the need for regime change, with a clear message about the importance of expressing dissent. Actionist artists regularly hold performances, creating works that contain anti-war messages. All of this, in essence, represents anti-war statements expressed through artistic images and metaphors. These works are displayed publicly. Often, these statements are formulated in “Aesopian language:” they do not speak directly, but rather hint at the message. Nevertheless, their authors face the real danger of being repressed if state representatives deem such works to discredit the Russian Armed Forces or threaten the government and state.

### Doublethink: Public Conversations

Some observers of contemporary Russian society note the normalization and habituation to the war, which has been ongoing for two and a half years with no end in sight. To some extent, this observation is accurate. The initial heated debates between supporters and opponents of military aggression have now subsided. People are gradually ceasing to talk about the war, pushing this topic out of public discourse and into private conversations “with their own.” It seems as though this topic is being carefully avoided.

I believe this strategy of avoiding conversations can be described as societal muteness, which is connected both to fears of repression and the normalization of the situation. Furthermore, societal muteness may be linked to the phenomenon of doublethink, where different beliefs are expressed in different contexts. In public situations—“in front of people”—one thing is said, while in private, with close people who share the same views, something else is expressed. For example, at work, especially in government service, one must either remain silent or pretend to support the war. At the same time, in other situations, with different people,

one can express one's thoughts and feelings more openly. The phenomenon of doublethink was especially prominent during the Soviet era, but even now, signs of doublethink can be observed. As a result, frank discussions about the war among strangers on the streets of the city are almost nonexistent, although, to be fair, they do happen occasionally.

I have observed several instances where people who did not know each other began cautiously and carefully talking about the war. For example, I witnessed women who were undergoing treatment in a hospital and had been sharing a room for several days attempting to discuss the war. They simultaneously wanted to talk about it and were afraid to start the conversation. The discussion began with one woman talking about her son's military service, and then the conversation shifted to the war. It started very cautiously, with the ritual disclaimer "Of course, I'm a patriot. I love my country very much..." Following this statement were comments opposing the war and expressing disagreement with it. Most often, the dissent was framed in the form of questions or confusion: "But I don't understand why our boys are dying?"

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"Explain to me why this is happening, what's the purpose?" These questions were rhetorical; no one expected answers. The women questioned the meaning of the war in Ukraine. The strategies of "confusion" or "not understanding" somewhat soften what is essentially an anti-war statement, but it remains anti-war nonetheless.

Criticism of the war most often comes not from a political perspective but from a humanitarian one. People express sympathy and support for the victims of the war, regardless of their political affiliation or beliefs. It is precisely through this humanitarian perspective that an anti-war statement can gain strength and be expressed publicly.

Thus, the goal of this essay was to show that not everyone in Russian society supports Putin's policies and his government, and not everyone supports the war in Ukraine. Publicly opposing the war results in repression. Under these circumstances, opposition-minded people nevertheless try to find ways to express their position publicly and resist the regime using "weapons of the weak"—through sabotage, Aesopian language, and the practices of doublethink.

## From Russia to the Balkans: Civic Activists Transfer Experiences of Sustainable Living and Informal Education to Serbia and Montenegro

By Maria Tysiachniouk, University of Eastern Finland

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000705215

### Abstract

This article explores the development of intentional communities and eco-villages in Russia, focusing on their influence on eco-migrants' activities in the Balkans. Russian eco-villages, such as Large Stone in Schilikovo and Living Village in Bereznik, have promoted sustainable living, traditional folk culture, and environmental education. Since the war in Ukraine, some eco-village members have relocated to countries like Serbia and Montenegro, establishing new communities and contributing to local environmental projects. Urban initiatives, like Metauniversity, also play a significant role in these eco-migrants' efforts. The article highlights Russian eco-communities' migration patterns, cultural exchanges, and environmental contributions abroad.

Since the 1990s, Russia has witnessed the emergence of numerous eco-villages in rural areas and a few intentional communities in urban settings. These communities are rooted in specific locations, yet migration between them is common, as individuals seek environments that best align with their values and aspirations. In the 2020s, the growing pressures of the Russian authoritarian regime have pushed many of these communitarians to look beyond national borders. They have begun to relocate abroad, seeking new opportunities to realize their vision of sustainable, community-centered living in more open and supportive environments.

This article explores the pathways and innovations of individuals with experience living in Russian intentional communities who have relocated to Serbia and Montenegro. The article is based on observations that I shared at the gatherings of sociologists in St. Petersburg. I shared both participant observations and interview data. In Russia, I visited communities and places that inspired migrants from Russia to Serbia and Montenegro to bring with them innovations in alternative nature education, community building, and sustainable living on land—namely, Schilikovo, Bereznik, and Kovcheg—and participated in initiatives organized by inhabitants of the House on Srednyi Prospect urban commune in St. Petersburg (see Figure 1 on p. 20). I conducted biographical interviews with representatives of Russian communities and with migrants to the Balkans: 5 interviews in migrants' Russian places of origin, plus 7 interviews in Serbia and 11 interviews in Montenegro with those who have left Russia. My informants who have relocated to Serbia and Montenegro can be divided into two main groups: activists focused on the Russian diaspora and those involved in local initiatives with the host country. Both groups share social and environmental experiences with the residents of the host country and beyond.

In this article, I provide a brief overview of intentional communities in Russia, highlighting their role as the origin and formative experience for migrants. Then, I examine the specific practices as well as social and environmental innovations that Russian citizens have transferred to and implemented in the Balkans, shedding light on how they adapt and contribute to their new environments.

### Intentional Communities in Russia

In Russia, there are hundreds of intentional communities and eco-villages, many of which were once actively involved in the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Before the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, eco-villages like Kovcheg regularly hosted festivals focused on environmental technologies. With the outbreak of the war, however, many of the most active individuals fled abroad, seeking refuge in such countries as Serbia and Montenegro.

Since the 1990s, I have studied and visited numerous eco-villages. In this article, I will briefly highlight those that have influenced the initiatives and practices of Russian eco-migrants in the Balkans. The oldest of these is the Large Stone project, which began in the 1990s in Schilikovo, Vologda region (see Figure 2 on p. 17). Several families founded this community with a focus on ecology, child development, and health. In 1999, the community expanded its focus to include traditional folk culture, celebrating the Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer solstices. By 2004, members of the Large Stone project were organizing Russian Orthodox Christmas celebrations in the Grishino eco-village, with the same participants frequenting both communities. This practice would later be carried over to Montenegro.

In 2009, the informal Union of Russian Eco-Villages was established, eventually becoming the formal Union of Eco-Settlement Initiatives. This organization later



**Figure 2: Summer Solstice Celebration**

Source: Large Stone, Schilikovo.

joined the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Russian eco-villagers became increasingly international, visiting GEN members worldwide and inviting international volunteers to Russia. Participants from the U.S.–Russia exchanges visited Schilikovo, and eco-settlers took part in numerous international projects. Unfortunately, in 2015, the Large Stone project came to an end after a fire destroyed its traditional house.

The founder of Large Stone then moved to Bereznik in the Arkhangelsk region, establishing a new community called Living Village. This community inherited the folk traditions and solstice celebrations of Schilikovo. Living Village became involved in various informal educational projects, including the “School of a Village Household” and the “Forest School.” Representatives of the community traveled widely, participating in GEN gatherings, and volunteers, particularly from Norway, came to support the settlement. The Bereznik settlers also worked on several international projects related to sustainable forest management and climate change.

Starting in 2018, Bereznik led the “Eco-stream” environmental education project online, with nature expeditions held offline (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Eco-Philosophy Circle and Following Meditation, Eco-Stream Branch of Metauniversity**

Source: Line drawing by Alexandra Orlova.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Bereznik community worked on a demonstration platform for climate change mitigation as part of an EU-sponsored project. They

reproduced practices from the Swedish community of Suderbyn, establishing a permaculture garden, traditional stoves, and bio-toilets while helping other communities in the region develop climate adaptation strategies. The Bereznik settlers also organized Climate-Art exhibitions in Arkhangelsk, St. Petersburg, and various villages.

In 2022, the Bereznik community split into two groups. One group remained in Bereznik, continuing to host guests for summer and winter camps and maintaining the solstice celebrations. The other group relocated to the Belbek Valley in Crimea, which, despite the war, has become a hub for environmental and social entrepreneurship.

Several urban communal houses have historically been closely connected with these eco-settlements. Notable examples include the House on Srednyi Prospect, Metauniversity (founded in 2014, it established the Eco-stream environmental education program in 2018), and Esher (founded in 2007), a creative group focused on personal growth. While eco-villages focus primarily on living in harmony with nature, these urban entities emphasize self-fulfilment, personal growth, and co-creating meaningful lives. Through their projects, they aim to positively impact as many people as possible.

Since the war began in February 2022, many active members of these urban initiatives have relocated to Israel, Georgia, and European countries. In the Balkans, I encountered Russian migrants who were influenced primarily by eco-villages and, to a lesser extent, by Metauniversity and Eco-stream. Both rural and urban communities have played an essential role in shaping the creative projects of eco-migrants in Serbia and Montenegro, influencing their contributions to their new host countries.

### From Russia to Fruška Gora, Serbia

In Serbia, several Serbian and Russian families are involved in sustainable construction and permaculture in rural areas, having left urban life to pursue a “back to nature” lifestyle. While they connect with each other, they do not form intentional communities and instead live among conventional households. During my research, I visited one such homestead, Šumska 1, and interviewed owners and settlers near the border of Fruška Gora National Park. I noticed striking similarities between initiatives like the Forest School and the informal Forest University in Serbia and their counterparts in Russia, although these developed independently.

Šumska 1 is a multi-generational family homestead founded by musicians who live with their children and grandchildren. They have adopted sustainable technologies, such as solar heating and eco-friendly water supply systems, have established a Forest School (kindergarten),

and practice permaculture. They also engage in eco-tourism within the national park, hosting yoga seminars and work weekends with vegan food, music, and entertainment for city visitors, primarily from Novi Sad. Construction at Šumska 1 uses natural materials like straw, mud, and reclaimed timber.

Šumska 1 attracts international volunteers through platforms like Workaway. During my visit, two Russian volunteers were present. One had previously worked on infrastructure for a music festival in Bereznik, Arkhangelsk oblast, and had helped build a summer camp on an island as part of an EU-sponsored climate education project. At Šumska 1, he played a key role in finding simple, cost-effective solutions for building with natural materials, improving water supply, installing solar power, and setting up a playground for children. His wife contributed significantly to organizing volunteer activities and helped plan the Forest School, bringing insights from their experience with the Living Village Forest School in Bereznik. Their activities in Serbia closely mirrored their work in Russia, as they continued to move from place to place, gaining and sharing knowledge.

I also met a Russian IT specialist with experience of village life, including Bereznik. When I visited, he was living in a tent near Šumska 1 and working on “Symbiocentric Environments,” a project aimed at fostering collaboration between nature reserves and rural settlers. His activities in Serbia were empowered by what he had been doing and dreaming to implement in Russia. His goal was to unite scientists, students, and eco-centric people in outdoor educational activities and environmental initiatives. He was actively involved in an informal Forest University organized by Serbian professors and had led online seminars connecting participants from Northern Europe and the Balkans.

### Mountain Land, Montenegro

During my visit to Montenegro, I explored several towns and visited the Mountain Land co-operative, a 16-hectare property located 20 kilometers from Mojkovac in the mountains. This scenic area, with its streams, fields, and slopes, was founded by a Russian migrant family in collaboration with a French settler family. The project brought together co-owners from Russia, a Serbian family who initiated the Forest University, and other families from Israel and various countries.

The Russian co-founder of Mountain Land holds a PhD in Philosophy and has extensive experience in eco-villages. He first connected with the Schilikovo village at the age of 18 and maintained strong ties to the community, frequently participating in solstice celebrations.

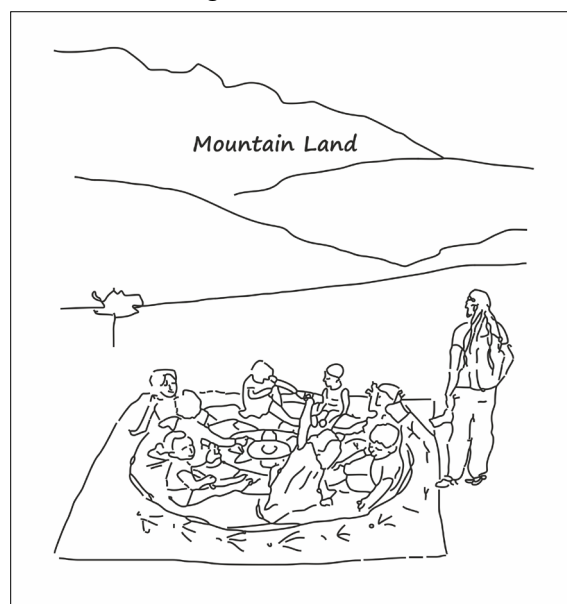
He also authored a book on the Kovcheg eco-village and was a regular visitor to Grishino. Passionate about alternative education, he co-organized the Forest School in Bereznik, where he envisioned building treehouses for children. In Russia, he helped establish the Eco-stream program as part of Metauniversity and participated in various Global Ecovillage Network initiatives.

Mountain Land emphasizes sustainable, environmentally friendly land management through a horizontal decision-making approach, utilizing the Dragon Dreaming method to set priorities for Service to the Earth, Community Building, and Human Development. Co-owners organize themselves into working groups to plan activities, which are then presented to the main circle for voting using tokens.

Mountain Land also claims to be prepared to respond to multi-level crises, including the potential need to host climate refugees from the Balkans. The co-operative is involved with the international Deep Life gathering, a movement focused on addressing global environmental and social crises. These gatherings, which connect participants to the Earth, originated in Mountain Land and were later adopted by the Bereznik community.

In 2023–2024, Mountain Land hosted a variety of events, including summer camps for children and adults, meditation retreats, nature walks, and music gatherings (see Figure 4). I attended their summer solstice celebration, which featured traditional folk dances and songs inspired by similar festivals in Schilikovo and Bereznik, Russia.

**Figure 4: Summer Camp for Kids, Mountain Land, Montenegro.**



Source: Line drawing by Alexandra Orlova.

## Compass School in Bar

The Compass School-Kindergarten in Bar is a branch of a private school in Budva that was founded to serve the Russian diaspora before the invasion of Ukraine. After the war began, a significant number of people fled from both Ukraine and Russia to Montenegro, increasing the demand for educational institutions. In response, one of the co-founders of Mountain Land assumed the role of director at the Russian–Ukrainian school in Bar.

The school's curriculum embraces various alternative educational approaches, drawing on inspiration from Russian Metauniversity, the Forest School in Berezniki, and other innovative methodologies. It places a strong emphasis on the psychological well-being of students, nurturing creativity, and fostering a deep connection with nature as core components of its educational philosophy.

In 2023, the number of students continued to grow as families sought alternative forms of education and settled in Bar. While high school students at Compass School take their exams in Montenegro, they ultimately graduate from a Moscow-based institution. The school is also committed to environmental sustainability and participates in international projects in collaboration with European educational institutions.

There is a close relationship between the Compass schools in Bar and Budva, as well as with the Mountain Land community. Teachers and tutors from these institutions work together to organize summer camps in the Mountain Land area. In 2024, Mountain Land hosted a festival of alternative education, offering individuals in Montenegro the opportunity to explore and engage with innovative educational practices.

## Conclusion

My research on the biographies of Russian alternativists who relocated to the Balkans reveals that they were all part of the broader back-to-nature movement. Rather than settling in a single location, these individuals moved fluidly between cities and rural areas, often residing in eco-villages and intentional communities. Their nomadic experiences allowed them to acquire diverse skills and knowledge, which they later shared with others.

In Serbia and Montenegro, a growing number of people are committed to building environmentally friendly intentional communities. While this move-

ment in the Balkans is relatively young, in Russia it has deeper roots that date back to the 1990s. This period saw the formation of numerous eco-villages, small urban communes, and alternative education programs, which provided platforms for communal living, shared learning, and the exchange of ideas.

The focus in the Balkans is on creating self-sufficient sustainable communities grounded in principles of trust, mutual support, and personal development. This environment has been particularly welcoming to Russian alternativists, whose expertise in building intentional communities is highly valued. Their migration has played a crucial role in transferring knowledge and skills to both Serbian and Montenegrin societies.

The relocation of Russian communitarians to Serbia and Montenegro represents a natural extension of the practices and values that shaped Russia's eco-villages and intentional communities. Faced with political pressures and seeking more open environments, these migrants have brought their knowledge of sustainable living, alternative education, and community-building to the Balkans. While adapting to their new settings, they have remained true to their core values, contributing meaningfully to local initiatives.

In Serbia, settlements like Šumska 1 illustrate how Russian eco-migrants are adjusting to rural life, introducing eco-friendly technologies, organizing educational programs, and building networks with volunteers and local communities. Similarly, in Montenegro, projects like Mountain Land have become hubs of international cooperation, hosting events that focus on sustainability, holistic well-being, and communal living. Their deep connection to nature and alternative education, honed in Russia, continues to influence their work abroad, as exemplified by initiatives like the Compass School in Bar.

This movement underscores not only the resilience of these individuals, but also their potential to transform their host countries by integrating sustainable practices and fostering eco-centric communities. In so doing, Russian migrants in the Balkans are opening up new avenues for cross-border collaboration, reinforcing the idea that intentional communities can thrive even amid political and social uncertainty. Their ability to adapt and innovate in new environments offers a hopeful model for addressing global challenges, from climate change to social upheaval, through cooperative, earth-centered approaches.

### *About the Author*

*Maria Tysiachniouk* holds a Master of Science in Environmental Studies from Bard College, NY, a PhD in Biology from the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a PhD in Sociology from Wageningen University (2012). Throughout her entire career, she has studied the environmental movement in Russia and its transformation. Tysiachniouk has written over 270 publications on topics related to transnational environmental governance, edited several books, and conducted fieldwork in several countries and regions. She is currently a senior researcher at the University of Eastern Finland.

### Further Reading

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Figure 1: Research locations in Russia, Serbia, and Montenegro.



Source: Designed by Alexandra Orlova and Sofia Beloshitskaya

**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

Editors: Fabian Burkhardt, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

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Responsible editor for this issue: Robert Orttung

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Sabrina Glasmacher, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2024 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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