

Hidden Resistance to the Russian-Ukrainian War Inside Russia

Journal Issue**Author(s):**

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Publication date:

2023-01-27

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000595208>

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Originally published in:

Russian Analytical Digest (RAD) 291



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Helping Ukrainian Refugees as an Alternative to Street Protest

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

In this article, I explore the network of volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees who have ended up on Russian territory while fleeing the war zone. Based on 31 in-depth interviews with the members of the volunteer network in Telegram, I analyze their attitudes toward the war and motives for joining the network. I further demonstrate that for the participants in this chat, helping Ukrainian refugees is in essence an alternative to anti-war street protests.

Ukrainian Refugees in Russia

According to [UN data](#), since February 2022, about 2.8 million refugees have fled Ukraine to Russia. Ukrainians have not always arrived in Russia of their own free will, although this does not necessarily mean that they were forcibly taken to Russia. A more typical scenario is that people who found themselves in the battle zone did not really have a choice: the humanitarian corridor provided by the Russian military was the only way to escape.

To accommodate Ukrainian refugees, over 800 PVRs (temporary accommodation points) were established in 58 Russian regions to provide refugees with temporary shelter and food.

However, not all Ukrainians who found themselves on Russian territory wanted to stay in PVRs. Some of them wanted to go to Europe to reunite with their relatives who had sought refuge in European countries or just because they did not want to stay in the aggressor country. Others hoped to return to Ukraine as soon as possible.

Ukrainian refugees are often physically and mentally traumatized people who need medical care and psychological treatment. Many spent weeks in the basements of their houses, hiding from shelling, without food, water, or electricity. Lots of them saw their houses bombed and relatives and friends perish before their eyes.

One also needs to understand that Ukrainians striving to reach Europe are often residents of small towns and villages who have rarely visited large cities even in Ukraine, never mind foreign countries. As a rule, they do not speak any foreign languages; it is difficult for them to book an itinerary via the Internet, buying tickets or finding hotels. Many of them do not even own suitcases. It is therefore obvious that to make the difficult journey from the Ukrainian border through Russia and across the European border, Ukrainian refugees need help. It is no less obvious that in this matter they cannot count on assistance from the Russian state.

Volunteers Helping Ukrainian Refugees

The community of volunteers (or “the chat,” as they usually call themselves) was created precisely to assist Ukrainian refugees who did not want to stay in Russia. It was launched in St. Petersburg in March–April 2022 as a joint effort by a group of friends to help some families from Mariupol to reach Europe. Between April and July, the chat expanded from less than 100 members to over 10,000 participants. Simultaneously, a similar chat appeared in Moscow and experienced the same explosive growth (to about 9,000 participants). As the chats expanded, volunteers started to help not only refugees who wanted to leave for Europe, but also those who decided to stay in Russia.

In addition to the two in St. Petersburg and Moscow there are many related chats of volunteers in other regions and cities. The most active of these are the chats in the southern regions of Russia, which have received the majority of the flow of refugees coming from Ukraine. Cities such as Rostov, Belgorod, and Krasnodar, as well as Crimea and Smolensk, have the largest communities of volunteers. Various groups of volunteers operate in almost all Russian cities where PVRs have been established.

How the Help Works

Requests for help from refugees are accepted by volunteers who keep in touch with their “wards” 24/7, responding to their requests and solving problems as they arise. They help in purchasing travel tickets, organize accommodation and meals along the route, and arrange medical assistance if necessary.

Volunteers also help those who have decided to stay in Russia. Unlike relatively short-term help to travel to the European border the work with those who remain can drag on for weeks and months.

To take proper care of their wards, volunteers seek help from the network. They approach the chat with specific tasks, such as, for example, “# to shelter a family of three for 2 nights—a grandmother and a woman with

a child of 5 years old,” “# to meet an elderly couple from Mariupol, 75 y.o., at the railway station, feed them, take them to the bus station and put them on a bus to Tallinn”; “# men’s boots/sneakers size 43, warm jacket for a 12-year-old boy”; “# crutches or wheelchair for a disabled elderly man”; “needed: diapers and baby food”; “needed: medical consultation for a patient after a stroke”; “needed: to drive a group of 5 people and a dog to the Finnish border,” etc. The tasks are being solved immediately.

Volunteers can also specialize in specific tasks. Some of them organize warehouses of donated items. There is a group of drivers (“auto volunteers”) who take refugees across the border. There is also a separate chat of medical workers who purchase medicines and organize consultations with doctors and, if necessary, treatment of wards. Some volunteers specialize in taking care of the pets and animals that many refugees bring with them. Within the general chat, there is a chat providing psychological assistance to those volunteers who have developed psychological burnout and depression following close communications with refugees. The money collected from donations and charitable fairs is accumulated in a special fund used to buy tickets and medicine, fund medical consultations and treatments, and other purposes.

Research

The fieldwork lasted from August to December 2022. I conducted 31 in-depth interviews with volunteers in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Most of the interviews were conducted online, but I also took 9 interviews in person during a visit to St. Petersburg in December.

The interview guide focused primarily on attitudes toward the war and reasons for joining the chat. All interviews lasted for at least one hour and were conducted on the condition of anonymity (all names in the quotations have been changed).

Attitudes toward the War and Reasons for Joining the Chat

For all my interlocutors, February was experienced as a disaster. All of them understand the catastrophic consequences of the war for the country and for their personal lives:

“I was just in horror, and I’d sit and cry, ... I couldn’t even breathe, I had a feeling, just like a stone in my soul, ... it was just hard to breathe” (Ella, 28, postgraduate student)

Many could not maintain their daily routines, they could not go to work or to university, any usual activity lost its meaning.

“I couldn’t do anything after the twenty-fourth: I couldn’t sell, I couldn’t talk about something not related to these events, I couldn’t pretend that this was not happening” (Sveta, 42, businesswoman)

Joining the Telegram network was, in the first instance, a way to survive the shock caused by the beginning of the war. Volunteers repeatedly said that for them, finding the chat was a “salvation,” “the way out of a cognitive dead end” or “cognitive dissonance.” “If not for this chat, I would have gone crazy” (Olga, 45, businesswoman). Volunteering helped them to “escape from reality,” to busy themselves with something that makes sense while leaving “no time for depressing thoughts, or even for reading the news” (Agatha, 45, journalist).

Not least among their motivations was overcoming social isolation. After February 24, many volunteers found themselves surrounded by pro-Z-minded relatives and colleagues. Many lost friends when the latter emigrated from Russia immediately after the beginning of the war. Joining the chat was, in a sense, akin to joining a community of like-minded people. Some informants say that they have acquired new life and new friends here.

Finally, joining the network was a way to overcome the feeling of helplessness, to feel like an “actor” rather than an object of political manipulation. Volunteering helped my respondents to “overcome and survive helplessness and atomization,” to feel the power of collective action, and to realize “that together we can do everything” (Adrian, 45, artist).

Attitudes toward Street Protests

For most of my informants, their first response to the beginning of the war was an impulse to go out onto the street. However, enthusiasm for protest was quickly replaced by disappointment.

According to my interviewees, open protest proved to be a completely ineffective way of expressing opposition to the war. The security forces were well prepared for the protests: participants were met at the exit of the metro station and put into paddy wagons (*avtozaki*). Those who managed to avoid arrest moved through the streets in small groups or alone, running away from the police, so it was impossible to organize any kind of protest procession.

The press hushed up the protests. As they were invisible in the media space, they could not influence public opinion in any way. In the words of one informant who was arrested for taking part in an anti-war protest, it was possible, with the same result, to “just go straight and sit into the ‘paddy wagon,’ but who will benefit from this? No one will even know about it” (Tatiana, 25, student).

The disappointment was aggravated by the relatively small number of protesters: “...[the protest took place] against the background of a cheerful crowd flocking along Nevsky Prospekt with shopping bags from Gostiny Dvor as if nothing terrible was going on, ... and here you see this hundred brave boys and girls with tiny [anti-war] posters—well, that did not make any sense” (Adrian, 45, artist).

A further reason for the negative attitude toward street protests was the fear of physical violence, especially among women:

It's scary, you know... although they say that women are not beaten hard, but sometimes [policemen] still beat them. I'm not even physically afraid, but, well, ... after all, I went out [to protests] one or two times but it seems to me that I could have contributed better by doing something else (Kathe, 44, engineer).

Women, especially single mothers, were afraid of being arrested and separated from their children for a long time.

Participation in street actions that would “not be even reported in any news coverage,” yet were extremely risky, only aggravated the feeling of total helplessness among my interviewees. Thus, while at the beginning of the war some of them thought seriously about organizing protest resistance, after participation in several protest actions, they generally dropped these intentions.

This does not mean that all of them completely reject the idea of street protest. However, the prevailing opinion is that today in Russia there is no legal mechanism for converting “internal protest” (a feeling of disagreement with what is happening in the country) into somewhat effective public action. Unlike participation in street protest, helping Ukrainian refugees has visible practical outcomes and brings psychological relief and satisfaction:

There are people, especially among my young colleagues... who have taken a different path, not the path of help, but the path of participation in actions. All of them have already received several fines, they have been detained, but I don't really believe in the effectiveness of this path—well, maybe this is my personal skepticism, but, well, so far, I see that the efficiency [of this path] is kind of sad ... (Oxana, 58, eco-activist).

Risks Associated with Helping Ukrainians

The risk of being prosecuted by law enforcement agencies was the primary response to my question about possible risks of volunteering activity. However, in the case of helping refugees, this risk is not as straightforward as in the case of anti-war protests. On the one hand, volunteering is a legal form of civic activism that does not break any Russian law. Helping refugees even seems to support the government's propagandistic statements about the “liberation” of Ukrainians from a “fascist regime.” Helping Ukrainians to leave Russia is also beneficial for the regime because it reduces the burden on the state budget allocated to support refugees and prevents the accumulation of people negatively disposed toward the country within Russia.

On the other hand, any civic activity outside state control is perceived by the state as a potential threat to

the regime. “We know that in our country the word ‘legal’ can only be used in quotation marks. Any initiative that gathers too many people begins to arouse the deepest interest [from the law enforcement bodies]” (Agatha, 45, journalist).

Many interlocutors told me that they try not to use the word “volunteer” when communicating with PVR officials, since it makes them wary.

Everyone is sure that FSB agents are watching the chats. Interviewees cited multiple examples of provocations (such as requests to help evacuate wounded Ukrainian servicemen). Some wards admitted to volunteers that during interviews with FSB officers at border control, they were forced to give the names of all volunteers with whom they communicated and to show all correspondence with the coordinators.

Another threat comes from the nationalist pro-war groups, which are no less dangerous to the volunteers than the FSB. They harass volunteers with the tacit approval of the law enforcement agencies. One shocking example is the case of a group of volunteers in Penza helping Ukrainian refugees, which had to give up after one of its activists—a woman with three children—was kidnaped and tortured by pro-war nationalists trying to find out where the group's financial support came from.

While understanding the risks, volunteers continue to help refugees because it has become a way of preserving their humanity in the context of the ongoing war. “Personally, I went into this activity with an absolute awareness that at some point, the FSB officers could fall on me. And it doesn't scare me because I just can't live without it [volunteering]. And I know that many feel the same. Well, you weigh the pros, you weigh the cons, and you make your decision.” (Alla, 25, student)

Conclusion

The assistance to Ukrainian refugees described in this article can be considered an anti-war civic initiative that, while humanitarian in nature, has a strong political sentiment. Volunteers cannot express their negative attitudes toward the war openly by going out into the streets. Volunteering is therefore a way for them to convert their rejection of the war into (legal) civic action that is visible and has a positive effect.

This does not mean, of course, that all Russians helping Ukrainian refugees share the same political attitudes. Many pro-war activists also collect donations, warm clothes, and other necessary items for the Ukrainians in PVRs. Charitable campaigns are regularly launched by the state to collect funds and items for Ukrainian refugees.

While it is hard to estimate the real scale of opposition to war among the Russian population, it is obvious that in doing this, one cannot rely solely on the figures for participation in open protests. As this analy-

sis of the chat has demonstrated, refusal to participate in street protests does not equate to a pro-war position, and there are many other ways to demonstrate disagree-

ment with the state's military policy that are less visible but no less significant.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Arson Attacks on Military Enlistment Offices and the Reaction of Russian Propaganda

By Daria Zakharova (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

Attacks and arson against Russian military enlistment offices, which represent one of the cores of the Russian war machine, have become a common form of anti-war protest. This article examines these attacks and how the Russian state-run media discuss them.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a massive wave of discontent and protests worldwide. Within Russia itself, however, the public response is believed to have been muted. For instance, the number of protesters who took to the streets of Russia's capital, Moscow, on the first day of the invasion was estimated at around 700. This reality can be attributed to a range of factors, but the main cause is the serious toll that protests take on a person in Russia. With the invasion of Ukraine, Russia introduced de-facto "military censorship," rapidly issuing prison sentences to those who criticized the invasion of Ukraine. The severity and danger of persecutions produced an explosion of underground anti-war movements, which many Russians chose as a safer or more reasonable alternative to open protest. Attacks and arson against military enlistment offices (so-called military commissariats), which represent a core of the Russian war machine, became a regular form of protest, with around 77 attacks recorded in the first 10 months of the war.

The Attacks

Military commissariats in Russia are, first and foremost, responsible for conscription into the compulsory and contract army service (the latter is available to those who served in the compulsory service and are willing

to stay). There are approximately 1,300 military commissariats in Russia. The first months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine mostly featured the participation of contract army soldiers. In September 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a mobilization in order to send around 300,000 additional soldiers to Ukraine on an obligatory basis. The implementation of this mobilization is also the responsibility of Russian military commissariats. Thus, the commissariats have been involved in supplying soldiers to Ukraine at all stages of the war. The attacks on the commissariats have both a concrete purpose—to destroy the personal records of Russian men in order to create a barrier to further conscription—and a general one—to attack military-related spots in Russia.

The first attack on a military commissariat took place in the Moscow region. On February 27, 2022, 21-year-old Kirill Butylin threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of a military commissariat near Moscow. He also published a manifesto about his arson. "Ukrainians will know that Russians are fighting for them; not everyone is afraid and not everyone is indifferent. Our protesters must be inspired and act more decisively. And this should further break the spirit of the Russian army and government," Butylin wrote.

This first arson was followed by a range of similar attacks across Russia. Attackers ranged from students to mature men in their 50s and from pregnant women to elderly people. Often, they caused insignificant damage with self-made Molotov cocktails. Most attackers were detained and charged with property damage.

In summer 2022, the Russian Federal Security Service, the internal secret service, became involved in investigating these arson attacks. According to Russian human rights observers, this period saw the swift reclassification of the criminal charge the arsonists faced—from property damage (Art. 167, part 2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) to terrorism (Art. 205, part 1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). This increased the maximum prison term from 5 years to 15 years. The measure temporarily depressed the wave of attacks on the military commissariats, which remained quite few in number over the summer.

The mobilization announced by the Russian president in September 2022 prompted a new wave of attacks on the military commissariats that significantly exceeded the previous one in scale. According to the advocacy-related *Mediazona*, approximately 77 acts of arson and attacks on military commissariats have been recorded since the beginning of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Reaction of State Propaganda

Obviously, the Russian government and state-run media did not refer to the arsonists in a positive way. Nevertheless, the trend of increasing attacks has mostly been hushed up by the major TV channels and high-ranking officials. Online state-run media, meanwhile, have covered the arson attacks in significant depth.

Drug Addicts, Teenagers, and Psychopaths

These media have been characterizing the attackers and arsonists of the military commissariats in a dehumanizing way. According to *Life Media*, “performers of arson in Russia, as a rule, are drug addicts, outcasts, and teenagers who are attracted by easy money.”

State-run news agency *Regnum* wrote a story about a drug-addicted teenage girl whose drug dealer demanded that she carry out an arson attack at a military commissariat in Nizhny Novgorod. “According to the available information, a teenager from Nizhny Novgorod who was involved in the distribution of drugs received another batch of prohibited substances from the dealer and appropriated it. After that, the drug dealer began to threaten the teenager and demanded that she set fire to the military commissariat in the Kanavinsky district of Nizhny Novgorod,” *Regnum* wrote.

State-run outlet *Argumenty i fakty* released an article that claimed to paint a psychological portrait of the attackers of Russian military commissariats. The article

stresses that the perpetrators of these attacks are predominantly men who suffer from mental disorders. “A significant share of these people are psychopaths who are ready to do anything. They fall under the influence of some negative magnetic fields and a certain plan, an obsession, begins to crystallize in them. There are many people with a disturbed psyche,” the article quotes retired Federal Security Service (FSB) Major General Aleksandr Mikhailov as saying.

Ukrainian Mercenaries

Another popular narrative among state-run media is that of a “Ukrainian trace” behind the attacks. State-run news agency *RIA Novosti* issued a report titled “Ukrainian Nationalist Recruited Russians for the Explosions at Russian Military Offices.” In the video, a Russian man claims that some “Ukrainian nationalist” contacted him on Telegram and offered him around \$2,000 to conduct an arson attack against a Russian military commissariat.

Another state-run media outlet, *Izvestia*, released a video in which a Russian man claimed that some Ukrainians blackmailed him into setting fire to a military office in Dagestan by threatening to kill his father living in Ukraine if he did not.

Some media refer directly to the arsonists as “mercenaries of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).” The TV channel *Tsargrad* published on its website an article titled “SBU Mercenaries Are Caught in Russia. Experts Explained the Similarities between Them.” According to the article, the Russian FSB detained several SBU mercenaries who had planned sabotage across Russia. “21-year-old Andrey from Vladivostok was offered 120,000 rubles for an arson of the local military commissariat. Some man named Albert wrote to him and asked him to set fire to the commissariat. The guy agreed, but refused to pass the training. As a result, the customer did not like that the building did not even catch fire, so the arsonist did not receive any money,” *Tsargrad* wrote.

It has also become common for the Russian state-run media to publish “confessions” of the alleged arsonists in which, after being detained, they admit to having received a reward from Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Council have not commented on the accusations of Russian state-run media. However, the available facts suggest that their claims are hardly truthful. According to the Russian human rights NGO “Avtozak-live,” the intensity of attacks on military commissariats increased eightfold following the announcement of mobilization in Russia. This implies that the movement is driven more by personal issues (such as a fear of being mobilized) than by concern about the invasion in general. Arsonists’ confessions of connections with Ukraine cannot be treated as reliable proof, as many of them, especially those who have faced FSB investigations, claim to have been severely tortured.

Lack of Patriotic Education

Some state-run media have conducted deeper analysis, attempting to find the “roots” of the arsonists’ behavior. *Tsargrad* issued a broadcast titled “We Will Bring Up a Russophobe for Your Money. How Traitors Are Raised in Private Schools.” The broadcast began by showing a range of videos featuring arson attacks against military commissariats that have been conducted in Russian cities, which, according to the presenter, are carried out by “typical schoolboys.” “How do such ideas appear in the heads of these homegrown 19-year-old half-witted Nazis? Were they taught anything at school? This is where we come to the main question: While healing the liberated territories of Ukraine of Nazism, don’t we lose sight of the same sprouts of Russophobia here in our country?” the presenter wonders. The presenter concludes that Russian private schools, often guided by European values and liberal standards, are to blame for raising such anti-patriotic youngsters.

Complex Background of Arsonists

In general, regardless of the narrative that propaganda employs toward the arsonists, it follows a single trend: simplification. Whether the arsonists are “recruited by the Ukrainian secret service” or “drug addicts,” the coverage provides primitive explanations of arsonists’ backgrounds. In fact, the arsonist movement is quite complex; people involved in arson represent a wide range of political and ethnic groups, from national minorities to anarchists and right-wing movements.

A significant share of the attacks have been recorded in those Russian regions dominated by national minorities, where people associate themselves with Russians only to a minor extent and may also speak their native language. Thus, in Bashkortostan, the number of such attacks has been quite high. In an [interview](#) given to the Russian independent media outlet *Verstka*, a range of people allegedly involved in arson attacks in Bashkortostan referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as “not their war” and claimed “they were not ready to die for Russian values.” “Why should Bashkirs die for the ‘Russian world’ somewhere in Ukraine? Ukrainians have done no harm to us, while the Russian Empire always oppressed us,” argued Ruslan Gabbasov, founder of the Bashkir Resistance Committee, which is allegedly behind the arsons in the region.

Another major force allegedly involved in the attacks on Russian military commissariats are underground far-right and anarchist groups. The far-right group NS/WP

(prohibited in Russia) has [claimed](#) responsibility for a range of arson attacks in several Russian cities. The group pursues the ideas of white supremacy and claims the necessity of unification between Russians and other “brotherly nations,” in particular Ukrainians. In April 2022 the group [posted](#) an appeal headlined “Do As We Do. Do Better than Us!” on its Telegram channel. In this appeal, they called on their potential allies to conduct arson against Russian cars with pro-war symbols and military commissariats. “We, Russian national socialists and white racists, oppose the anti-people regime, the current system is our main enemy. We do not identify ourselves with the opposition or with any external forces. Our goal is a national revolution,” the appeal summarized.

Some left-wing groups have also claimed credit for attacks. The [Militant Organization of Anarcho-Communists](#), which mainly carries out attacks on rail infrastructure, has [claimed](#) responsibility for a range of military commissariat arsons. Other attackers of military commissariats, however, were [not](#) belonging to any movement or having been involved in activism prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Conclusion

Russian state-run media have been covering the arsons in quite an ambiguous way. While big TV channels broadcasting within Russia have mostly abstained from covering them, online state-run media have developed a range of narratives about the arsonists. The reason for this may be the authorities’ unwillingness to remind their audience about the fact and the number of arsons. Those who read online media are exposed to more information and thus may be more likely to learn about the attacks, prompting online state-run media to provide the explanation of “bad arsonists.”

In framing their narratives about the arsonists, state-run media have not bothered to investigate arsonists’ real backgrounds in order to come up with more realistic accusations. For instance, the fact that a right-wing group is openly involved in these arson attacks might have been exploited by the state-run media to discredit the liberal Russian opposition, yet they have instead continued to rely on propagandistic clichés about “drug addicts” and “Ukrainian mercenaries.”

Thus, while the arsonist movement includes people with very diverse backgrounds, Russian propaganda has followed its general trend of dehumanizing regime opponents and simplifying their backgrounds.

About the Author

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“No Wobble”: Silent Protest in Contemporary Russia

By Vera Dubina (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen) and Alexandra Arkhipova (École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

Contemporary Russian society does not visibly oppose the invasion of Ukraine. There are no barricades or protesters in the streets; even the military mobilization has not triggered an open clash between the public and the authorities. Despite several waves of active emigration from Russia, the majority—if surveys by sociologists at the Russian Levada Center are to be believed—remain silent. But does this silence mean consent and support for the war? In this paper, we examine the various forms of protest in which Russians are engaging, with a focus on the less visible, “silent” (and therefore in need of closer examination) forms of resistance to the regime. These are small acts of dissent that have generally been individual, spontaneous, and unarmed and that have taken place in spaces of everyday socialization. They may be no more than words or symbols, yet they are not insignificant, as they demonstrate disagreement with the powers that be.

Contemporary Russian society does not visibly oppose the invasion of Ukraine. No mass demonstrations are visible; ordinary citizens do not seem to be resisting despite the fact that since September 2022 it has been possible that they will be conscripted into the army, where they will have to become killers and quite possibly be killed themselves. If opinion surveys by sociologists at the Russian Levada Center are to be believed, only just over half of the population follows developments in Ukraine closely. Can the passivity of the population be explained solely by fear of a dictatorial regime and years of repression against all who disagree? And does the silence of the majority mean that Russian society supports the war?

The Suppression of Protests in Russia and Its Legal Framework

It is well-known that in today’s Russia, protest is not only forbidden by law, but also dangerous to one’s personal safety and even one’s life. The Russian Administrative Code bans all gatherings in public places without the express permission of the local authorities. The definitions of a public place and of an assembly are left deliberately vague: an assembly could be a meeting of two people at a bus stop. Getting permission to organize an opposition rally has always been a challenge, but since 2018, it has been practically impossible. Thus, over the past ten years or so, protest against any decision on the part of the authorities was carried out in the form of solitary pickets, for which no special approval was required. But since the outbreak of the war, even a solitary picket can be punished with up to 15 years’ imprisonment under the so-called “fake news” article. Adopted in March 2022, Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code, “Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the armed forces of the Russian Feder-

ation, the exercise of their powers by state bodies of the Russian Federation”, provides for a penalty of up to 15 years’ imprisonment.

Although Russian protests are more peaceful than local discos, they are suppressed with particularly demonstrative brutality by a specially created unit, OMON, which has been part of the “Rosgvardia” (National Guard of the Russian Federation) since the latter was established in 2016. During political protests, people have had their arms and legs broken, been dragged along the ground by their hair into police cars, etc. In police stations themselves, they often face bullying and even torture. And over the last decade, the gap between the violence of the special forces and the emphatic non-violence of protests has only widened. The moment one person holding a banner arrives at a peaceful protest, he is surrounded by five or more heavily armed police officers; it would be strange for a protester to expect to win by force.

On February 24, 2022, when a lot of people were trying to protest against the beginning of the war, one of the authors of this text saw little schoolgirls in Moscow shouting in the faces of such forces, who were dressed in bulletproof suits and helmets that made them look more like astronauts than people: “We are protesting against the war so that you will not be sent to Ukraine.” This peaceful protest could have succeeded if there had been any hope of the police and troops going over to the side of the protesters. According to Mischa Gabowitsch, a researcher of protest in Russia, there was no such hope. Since the large-scale 2011 protests against parliamentary election fraud, which took place in more than 100 Russian cities, the authorities have actively worked to distance society from paramilitary forces. He wrote (Gabowitsch 2012, 74): “Thus, the protesters are confronted with a system in which

the security forces are recruited from the most violent sections of society, are mostly strangers to the protesters, and are tied to the political regime primarily through material reward.”

Thus, Russian protest in recent decades has been solitary and peaceful—it has been individual citizens’ speech. There is no opposition political leader in Russia who remains free; there is no independent press and there are no independent political parties. There is no independent court, and the parliament almost directly executes the orders of the executive. Foreign social media have also been banned since the war began: Facebook and Instagram have been declared “extremist organizations” in Russia, and a “private” opinion expressed online can be punished by up to 9 years in prison, a term recently received by former [municipal deputy Yashin](#) for posting a video about mass killings by Russian soldiers in Bucha on YouTube.

Hidden Acts of Dissent Instead of Political Protest on the Streets

In such dictatorial frameworks as today’s Russia, in which an open act of dissent involves very high risk, the subversive potential of small, everyday vernacular practices is greater than under democratic regimes. These everyday acts of dissent are less visible and can take the form of rumors or gossip, as well as songs, jokes, insults, and blasphemies with political content. Such forms of protest have been termed “[weapons of the weak](#)” by the anthropologist James Scott (Scott 1985). To a greater extent than jokes, blasphemies and insults fulfill a critical function and constitute a kind of barometer for the political state of mind of the community. The Russian regime is concerned about these everyday expressions of hostility, which it has sought out and punished rigorously—just as happened under other dictatorships, such as that of Stalin.

Since these “everyday forms of resistance” were theorized by James C. Scott, they have been given different names, including “non-violent,” “unarmed,” “peaceful,” and “passive,” depending on the aspects emphasized at any given time. Many studies have already revealed the ability of “ordinary people”—even those who lived under the inter-war European dictatorships or Stalinism—to appropriate the conditions of their existence and the power structures and to resist them. Alf Lüdtkke, who studied this phenomenon under National Socialism, called this way of evading the daily routines imposed by the authorities *Eigen-sinn*, often (imperfectly) translated as “self-willed” action or “stubborn willfulness.” *Eigen-sinn* gives people more room for maneuver, as they can (temporarily) evade the expectations or impositions of those in power despite the authorities’ efforts to control all areas of life (Lüdtkke 2015).

When public speech is accompanied by such consequences for life and health as we see in contemporary Russia, the desire to speak out is greatly reduced. But since the outbreak of the war we have seen another way of speaking out—what Umberto Eco calls “[semiological guerrilla warfare](#).” These “semiological partisans” write direct anti-war messages on fences and walls, and leave coded messages demanding “no war” on social networks and in other public spaces. In other words, they disrupt the authorities’ signal. Coded language, rather than direct dissent, has become the new “weapon of the weak.”

In addition to rare acts of direct defiance—solitary pickets with anti-war posters—the most common forms of proletarianism have been graffiti with coded anti-war slogans (see Picture 2) and avoidance of the authorities’ demands. This arbitrary behavior is anonymous and often completely invisible to the outside eye: even wearing underwear in the color of the Ukrainian flag is an individual political protest.

Such individual actions are rarely reported in the Western media except in Russian. Such actions are not considered political protest, but, as the BBC Russian Service titled [Aleksandra Skochylenko’s](#) story, “The Little Act of a Normal Person.” To see them as political protest requires broadening our conception of “politics,” extending it beyond political parties and political institutions and linking it to the myriad microsocial interactions that take place in people’s everyday lives.

Cases of Anti-War “Silent” Protest in Russia

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, what can be called soft or silent resistance has come to dominate social media and the streets in Russia. It seems that astonishing ingenuity and creativity are being expressed by far more people than before the war. The authorities have forbidden calling the war a “war” under threat of prosecution under the fake news article of the administrative and criminal codes. Thus has resulted in creative substitutions that are as clear to everyone as the word “war,” including the substitution of words with dots, such as three dots plus five dots (... ····) to mean *Net voine*—“No to War.” Such creative substitutions have not subsided since February, but only taken on new forms after being deciphered by the punitive authorities.

Vobla, a fish known in English as the Caspian roach (Wobble), was one such substitution. At one point, a young woman in Tyumen wrote “Net v***e” and managed to prove in court that she had meant “Net voble” (No vobla) because she did not like that fish. “Vobla instead of war” became a very popular meme on social media. Perhaps as a result, the [case was reviewed](#): in December 2022 the court decided to charge the woman with discrediting the Russian army. Soon, images of fish appeared everywhere in the streets, becoming the

most popular hidden symbol of Russian anti-war protest (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: Photos from our Database. Location: St. Petersburg, Soldat Korzun Street; Date: November 19, 2022



Some ways of speaking out seem relatively safe, but they are also actively persecuted by the authorities. For example, Aleksandra Skochylenko, who in March 2022 replaced price tags in a supermarket with information about casualties among the population in Mariupol, was arrested in April 2022 under the “fake news” article of the criminal code and is still in detention. This is an established method used by the authorities: postponing the trial, keeping her in custody, not letting her lawyer in, not giving her the necessary medication, etc. Her next trial is scheduled for January 20, 2023.

In addition to Skochylenko, by May 2022, 11 people had been detained for the same type of action: replacing shop price tags with protest leaflets against the war. We have been compiling a dataset of court cases in which people were detained for spreading “discreditation about the Russian Army”—in other words, anti-war messages. We know of over 4,300 administrative and 162 criminal cases of that kind.

Equally creative is a poster about a missing dog, with a photo of the dog and the usual bold and bright text, when in fact the leaflet is an appeal to come to a protest on March 6 at 3pm (see Picture 2). Artistic protest practices also find a place in anonymous artwork on walls and

**Picture 2:
Missing Dog**

Ran away when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24. Its name is Future.

Your children won't have a Future if you don't speak out against war right now. Thousands of Ukrainian children have already had their Future taken away from them.

Speak out for the withdrawal of troops from Ukraine and/or come out to fight for the future.

March 6 at 15:00

Reward

Please take a photo and distribute this announcement.

March, St. Petersburg



fences. For example, a picture with three and five ballerinas instead of the letters “no to war”—a reference to Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*—was picked up by an unknown person and actively circulated on social media (see Picture 3 overleaf). In the Soviet Union, the ballet *Swan Lake* was a symbol of the death of a Soviet leader: on days of mourning, it replaced all other programs on all television channels. During the 1991 attempted coup d’état, it was con-

**Picture 3 : March, St. Petersburg
Three and Five Ballerinas in Place of the Letters “No to War.”**



stantly shown on TV instead of news. This is a reference understood by all those who lived in the Soviet Union and was also used in the 2020 protests in Belarus.

Every time the authorities start to pursue one of these creative modes of protest, another one pops up. Information about different ways of expressing opposition to the war is spread through Telegram channels and social media groups, which most internet users in Russia now access via VPNs. In this way, “silent” protest involves people who would not have thought of such ways of expressing themselves. For example, the aforementioned Aleksandra Skochylenko heard from a friend that she had read about replacing price tags in shops on the “Feminist Anti-War Resistance” Telegram channel and even downloaded a sample price tag—specially created by a designer—from there.

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Among the advantages of symbolic shows of resistance as a form of expressing dissatisfaction is their greater potential for gaining sympathy among other members of the community, particularly as they do not involve physical violence (T’Hart 2007, 185). A good example of this is the use of Orwell’s novel *1984* as a symbol of protest. People put a novel on the cash register in a café or on the window of their shop as a sign that “our people’ are here.” In the city of Ivanovo in April 2022, a man was arrested while handing out copies of Orwell’s novel to passersby. He received an administrative penalty, but the popularity of references to the novel on protest posters in the street or on social networks has not diminished: according to our database of anti-war protest, there are at least 18 court cases of people who have been punished for using Orwell signs. Indeed, this has grown to such an extent that even Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova felt it necessary to state that Russia cannot be compared to Orwell’s novel because he was not writing about Russia.

On Telegram channels, people actively share their ways of avoiding and not being complicit with the actions of the authorities, from finding legal ways not to send children to patriotism lessons—such as transferring them to homeschooling or not having them perform patriotic assignments on various pretexts—to various small and outwardly almost inconspicuous actions. For example, some people shared that they do not get on transport with military symbols (Z or V), write “Russia” with a small letter, or simply try not to go out in the street so as not to see all the agitation.

“Silent” protest refers to small acts of dissent that have generally been individual, spontaneous, and unarmed and that have taken place in spaces of everyday socialization. They may be no more than words or symbols, yet they are not insignificant, as they demonstrate disagreement with the powers that be.

Civic Activism Strategies of Russian Protest Musicians after February 24, 2022

By Katarina Meister (University of Helsinki)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

The full-scale war has brought with it new methods of suppression of the opposition, a large wave of emigration, and the closure of international companies. Many famous musicians who had already been singing about such topics as daily life under Putinism, corruption, the power vertical, and militarism have become anti-war activists, speaking out and raising money for Ukraine. In this article, I consider the situation of Russian protest music within and outside the country, as well as online.

Suppression in Russia

To understand the importance of music in the protests since February 24, 2022, it is worth keeping in mind the extent to which dissent has been suppressed, with thousands of people detained all over Russia. According to [OVD-info](#), the first month of the war was the most protest-heavy, with 15,343 people arrested (a total of 19,478 had been arrested as of January 8, 2023). In St. Petersburg, one woman was [arrested](#) for listening loudly to a song about the Nazi occupation of Ukraine (“Ukraine is Stormed by Soldiers,” Vladimir Vysotski, 1965), politicizing even those activities inside private residences.

The remaining uncanceled concerts of protest music inside Russia are the last public space for dissent, allowing a large group of people to mobilize in real time and protest in a physical space. For the artists, organizing these concerts is a big financial risk in the current Russian economy due to the likelihood that they will be cancelled. According to the journalist Aleksandr Gorbachev, the Russian music industry, if it has avoided collapse, has nevertheless shrunk dramatically: Spotify has left the country completely, Apple Music has stopped updating Russian playlists, and many artists have had to open companies outside Russia to continue to collect streaming revenue. The famous anti-war rapper Noize MC mentioned in an interview how his emigration has enabled him to finally earn money without the authorities’ involvement; only he and his listeners now determine whether he can make money.

The anti-war movement also includes the stars of the ‘80s protest music scene, such as Boris Grebenshchikov, Mashina Vremeni, and DDT. Their performances were restricted and cancelled during the Soviet era (Steinholt, 2004, p. 42–43), and now, 40 years later, they are back on the blacklists. Reactions to the blacklists that were leaked on [March 14](#) and [July 7](#), 2022, have been varied. The rap group Krovostok, for example, saw being blacklisted as a sign that they had done everything right and

openly expressed pride in it via social media. In that sense, the Russian authorities can be seen as actively contributing to activists’ sense of identity by making claims about who and what the activists are. The punk band Pornofilmy, meanwhile, has stated that being blacklisted has reduced promoters’ and clubs’ willingness to work with them, as hosting a concert for the band might bring uncertainty and have negative implications for their business.

Being blacklisted does not have any clearly articulated legal impact in the way that being labelled a foreign agent does. Remarkably, however, since February 24, 2022, the authorities have begun to add musicians to the “foreign agent” list: five popular protest musicians (Andrey Makarevich from Mashina Vremeni and four contemporary rappers: Oxxxymiron, FACE, Morgenshtern, and Noize MC) have been added to the list since April 2022. The lead singer of Anacondaz has said that when the authorities began to label musicians as “foreign agents,” it revealed how repressive the law is, as the music industry is by default connected to foreign money via streaming platforms, merch sales, and concerts held abroad.

There seems to be a concern to avert any form of a possible “singing revolution,” as the emergence of any anti-war cultural elements, emblems, and symbols that might unite people is being restrained (Siegień, 2019). In addition, in the current context of the full-scale war, new musical propaganda has appeared: the pop singer Shaman released the song “Let’s Get Up” (*Vstanem*) exactly one day before the full-scale invasion began. Musicologist Anna Vilenskaya has explained in great detail how, beyond the lyrics, Shaman’s songs are musically crafted to make people feel sensations of great patriotism, weaponizing music for military purposes. The protest music scene picked up his ultra-patriotic song “I am Russian” (*Ia russkii*): the comedian Aleksander Gudkov responded with a parody video, “I am Narrow” (*Ia uzkkii*), that has received over 6 million views as of January 2023. This

shows how state-sponsored narratives of nationhood have been deconstructed by oppositional creatives commenting on the ideological bleakness of the original music video and lyrics.

Currently, using the term “war” in the context of the situation in Ukraine is seen as engaging in oppositional politics in Russia, as government propaganda keeps insisting that it is a “special military operation.” With the suppression of anti-war speech, the correct choice of words becomes highly important when speaking up, which might explain why “Net voine” (“No to the war”) has become one of the main protest slogans of 2022, chanted by audiences at concerts both in Russia and abroad.

Musicians in Emigration

With emigration, the context for protest concerts is becoming increasingly international, as many famous musicians have left the country. Approximately 200,000 Russians have emigrated since the start of the full-scale invasion (Kamalov et al., 2022). A large share of protest music bands are now operating from outside Russia, as activity within Russia has become unsustainable and risky.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, protest music concerts have taken place in 70 different locations across Europe, Georgia, Israel, Armenia, Central Asia, and America. The highest concentration of concerts can be observed in the most popular emigration destinations, namely Tbilisi and Yerevan (Zavadskaya, 2022). Other popular concert locations are Tel Aviv, Tallinn, and Berlin.

As the songs are mostly sung in Russian but are politically oppositional, they are understood first and foremost as propagating anti-war resistance, and resonate with communities in Ukraine, Belarus, and other countries with large Russian-speaking minorities, such as the Baltic states. According to Aleksandr Gorbachev, before the full-scale invasion, the Russian-language connection between the countries might have involuntarily supported colonial frames in which Russians perceived Ukrainian artists as “theirs”; now, it has become clearer which bands are from which countries. Moreover, many fans, especially Ukrainian ones, expect Russian bands to speak out against the war as an act of moral protest aligned with the messages in their songs. Bands such as Ic3peak, Anacondaz, and Pornofilmy have claimed that their Ukrainian audience has mostly stayed with them and continued to attend their concerts following the onset of the full-scale war.

Logically enough, in the context of war, it has become crucial to determine whether a person with a Russian affiliation stands for or against the war. These concerts allow Russian emigrants and refugees to con-

struct oppositional identities. Thus, the name of the rapper Oxxxymiron’s first charity concert tour was *Russians against the War*. Protest performances are important because they help to form new meanings, discourses, and identities that play a role in longer-term cultural change and produce feelings of collective agency that help to sustain movements (Juris, 2014, p. 242), such as global resistance to Russian aggression.

Protest music concerts outside Russia help to create short-lived communities (to borrow a term from Mischa Gabowitsch) of Russian fans, older expatriates, and new émigrés who mobilize emotionally through shared anti-war symbols. Based on qualitative interviews I conducted in Estonia in October–December 2022, for some concertgoers—such as Dmitri, 37—there is no specific community of Russians, just as there is no diaspora among expats: “It’s kind of a natural repulsion of all the immigrants” (Meister, 2022). According to McNeill et al., the power and emotional impact of music is not only connected to the lyrics; the listener can feel “carried along” by collective activities like dancing and marching (Jasper, 2014, p. 33), which facilitate the emergence of new communities in the post-lockdown era.

According to social media data published by some of the most famous bands on Instagram and Facebook (both officially blocked but still used in Russia), a remarkable number of concerts by Russian protest groups (over 188) took place outside Russia between March and December 2022, including 67 charity concerts by 11 well-known Russian protest bands. Many more tours are already planned for 2023. This is evidence of a powerful global anti-war movement.

The full-scale war prompted the music community to react fast and mobilize together to organize charity concert tours. The largest sum of money was gathered by *Voices of Peace*, which brought in €340,000 from both tickets and online streaming donations across 10 concerts. This was a collaboration between the rapper Noize MC and the indie musician Monetochka, with the *leitmotif* of their 2019 song “People with Guns” (*Liudi s avtomatami*). The performance directly addressed Russian TV propaganda by using a pop-up green screen that turned the concert into a news setting for the online audience. Two of the other major charity enterprises were Oxxxymiron’s *Russians against the War* (also livestreamed) and *Stand with Ukraine*, a collaboration between the Russian rapper FACE, the Russian punk band Pornofilmy, and the Ukrainian rock group Nery. These three concert-series managed to raise a remarkable €667,000 for Polish and Ukrainian charities helping Ukraine. Livestreaming the European concerts allowed for a bimodal flow of dissent: the concerts reached Russians inside Russia by streaming protest into their homes and allowed people outside Rus-

sia to communicate their dissent via the YouTube live chat function.

Nastya Kreslina, lead singer of the electronic music band Ic3peak, said in an interview that helping one's close relations as well as people in Ukraine is the most effective way to process trauma caused by the war, as just sitting and thinking that "everyone hates me" is not helpful: "You will have to face uncomfortable situations, go through them and survive." James M. Jasper has called attention to the role of shared stigma as a source of reciprocal solidarity, just like in Noize MC's October 2022 song "Rainy Country" (*Strana dozhdei*). He writes about the felt stigma that Russians did not do enough to prevent the full-scale war from happening and should just stop existing. The feeling is described as one's life being crossed out by the letter "Z," but now directing a new one outside Russia. Even though shame is often a demobilizing mood of withdrawal, it still offers a strong (culturally or legally enforced) collective identity (Jasper, 2014, p. 35) that makes collective events therapeutic.

Digital Spaces

The question of what the common spaces for protest are is an important one. Even music videos on YouTube can be a platform for protest, spreading the message through audiovisual idea packages. Animation is one of the more flexible ways to artistically show dissent, anger, and despair, as well as reflect on the surreal reality, as in the videos for Monetochka's "Burn" (Gori) by Sergey Kolesov and in Nogu Svelo's new song "Anthem of the Doomed" (Gimn Obrechennykh). The video for the latter was produced by the famous cartoonist Oleg Kuvaev, the maker of *Masyanya*, who is also outspoken about the war. These kinds of audio-visual collaborations are another emerging format of joint activism, adding new visual ideas that elaborate the meanings of the songs.

It is curious to observe the dramatic rise in popularity experienced by some protest music bands during the first shockwave of the full-scale war. For example, viewership of Ic3peak's YouTube channel rose steadily from February 24 (1.9 million weekly views), peaking during the week of March 4–10 (with over 6.5 million weekly views). According to Google Trends, the week of February 27–March 5 brought the greatest interest in the band throughout their existence (Ic3peak was founded in 2013).

Both Ic3peak and the avant-pop band Shortparis had previously depicted Russian militarism in their music videos. Examples include "Moscow Speaking" (*Govorit Moskva*) by Shortparis and "Marching" (*Marsh*) by Ic3peak. The former video addresses fear as the basis of Russian nationhood, where the actual life of a person has no value. The aesthetics of the set and costume design

mix ideas from the Bolshevik Revolution with contemporary protest in a choreography loaded with symbolism, linking it to workers' rights and the value of one's work (symbolically, it was released on May 1, or International Labor Day, in 2021). Mastery of such fine artistic tools of resistance has become even more crucial now to avoid a group's concerts in Russia being cancelled. Even though Shortparis released new anti-war music videos, their meticulous approach prevented their 2022 concerts in Russia from being cancelled.

In another approach to digital platforms, some videos—such as "Death No More" (*Smerti bol'she net*, 2018) and "Dead but Pretty" (2022) by the electronic duo Ic3peak—use a green screen to make it look as though they were filmed in Red Square, in front of the FSB headquarters and parliament building, using it as a digital space of protest. It seems that conducting the protest digitally has not ended up limiting them, as they are making use of online protests including video effects added in post-production that would be life-threatening or get them arrested at the actual locations. Even though Ic3peak have always been open about their queer identities, it was only after the beginning of the full-scale war that they showed—in the "Dead but Pretty" video—the band members kissing police officers of the same sex in Red Square. Culturally, this emulates Voina's video "Kissing the Police" (2011), which features same-sex kisses between a member of the artist group and women police officers, except Voina's kisses were not consented to by the police.

Conclusion

The full-scale war and the ensuing restrictions in Russia have pushed many popular musicians to speak up and emigrate, among them Alla Pugacheva and her husband, Maxim Galkin, who was also declared a foreign agent due to his activism. Protest musicians have used the creative tools at their disposal to raise money for Ukraine and support oppositional communities in Russia and abroad. These concerts continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the anti-war movement globally while simultaneously helping Russian participants to construct their anti-war identities, condemning the Putin regime and standing with Ukraine. Previous experience of addressing problems in contemporary Russia is helping protest musicians to survive even in the new austere circumstances, finding creative ways and new spaces to voice dissent.

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Concert Statistics Based on:

Russians Against War (Oxxxymiron), Voices of Peace (Noize MC, Monetcchka), Charity concert for Ukrainians (FACE, Nervy (UA), Pochlaya Molly, T-Fest (UA), Makrae (UA), Barz (UA), Stand With Ukraine (FACE, Nervy (UA), Pornofilm), Charity concert (Pornofilm, BAH.ROMA), Songs Not Bombs (Dmitry Spirin), Uncancelled tour (Manizha), I3peak, Samoe Bolshoe Prostoe Chislo, Boris Grebenshchikov, Zemfira, Shortparis, Vasya Oblomov, Noize MC, Monetcchka, FACE, Boris Grebenshchikov, Mashina Vremeni, Kasta, Krovostok, Nogu Svelo!, Anacondaz, Morgenstern

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One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

The CSS combines research and policy consultancy and, as such, functions as a bridge between academia and practice. It trains highly qualified junior researchers and serves as a point of contact and information for the interested public.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich is a center of excellence for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian studies. It offers expertise in research, teaching and consultancy. The CEES is the University's hub for interdisciplinary and contemporary studies of a vast region, comprising the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the countries of the post-Soviet space. As an independent academic institution, the CEES provides expertise for decision makers in politics and in the field of the economy. It serves as a link between academia and practitioners and as a point of contact and reference for the media and the wider public.

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Fabian Burkhardt, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

Responsible editor for this issue: Robert Orttung

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2023 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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