

# ПОСЛЕ

INEQUALITY

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ELENA SOLOVYOVA



## WILL MOSCOW'S COLONIES RISE UP?

Environmental problems,  
political contradictions  
and the case of the Komi Republic

Now when the Putin regime is waging war with Ukraine, it is not easy to talk about anti-colonial sentiments in various federal subjects of Russian. Any open criticism is immediately regarded as “aiding the enemy.” The fog of war, described by Karl von Clausewitz, has spread over the whole country. The fog is so dense that even some of the regime’s critics who have left Russia peer into it and can’t see any glimpses of hope, which makes them interpret the situation as the majority’s tacit or even explicit support for the war. Some even refer to opinion polls. Yet they can hardly be considered reliable in contemporary Russia.

If not polls, what then? What can one rely on to understand what is happening behind the dense fog? To answer this question, we will use the example of the Komi Republic.

## **Environmental Activism as a False Bottom Box**

One can begin by scrutinising pre-war anti-colonial sentiments and their causes. If these voices do not sound as loud and as often as they used to, this does not mean that the war started by Putin instantly scorched everything. Anti-Moscow sentiments in Komi were caused primarily by extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth between Moscow and most federation subjects, and it is impossible to believe that the current difficulties have made past grievances obsolete.

Secondly, one has to remember the protests that took place in Russia in recent decades. The biggest and most successful ones were the fight for a park which was set to be cut down in Yekaterinburg, rallies against the construction of a landfill near the Shies railway station in the Arkhangelsk region and protests against the development of a limestone deposit in Kushtau, Republic of Bashkortostan. As one immediately sees, they all deal with environmental problems.

It may create the impression that Russians are very concerned about the environment. This, of course, is true, but it is far from the whole truth. Take any major environmental protest, and you will see a lot of neophytes who previously expressed dissatisfaction only in private conversations with friends. Environmental protest is less scary for people, as it is not seen to be directly about politics: it is about protecting their land and their children’s health, which immediately

gives these actions a lot of legitimacy in the minds of those who engage in it.

On the other hand, all major protests are instantly politicized, and their participants, who have started speaking out, cannot help recalling their old grievances. At the first rallies against the construction of a landfill in Shies (on the border between the Arkhangelsk region and Komi) in late 2018, speakers were already mentioning Moscow's colonial approach to the federation subjects: "we give them oil, coal, gas, timber, and all they return to us is garbage." Activists started collecting signatures for the resignation of the governors. Soon, first in Komi, and then in the Arkhangelsk region, demonstrators began to call for Putin's resignation. In June 2020, in Syktyvkar, a rally gathered from 7,000 to 10,000 people (by various estimates), and they voted en masse for a resolution demanding the resignation of President Vladimir Putin.

This is not simply an invitation to remember the glorious milestones of protest history, but rather a reminder that one has to closely monitor how the protest is channeled right now. The war is blinding in its globality, and it often hides numerous small protest hubs burning all over the country. For example, Kuzbass is protesting against coal mines, while Syktyvkar, the Komi capital, is fighting against another landfill. Many of these protests are still motivated by environmental issues, one of the reasons being that those dissatisfied with what is happening in the country and abroad find it safer and easier to blow off steam through an environmental protest. By the way, that is why the Ministry of Justice, like the Eye of Sauron, has recently turned its attention to environmental activists.

## **A Split**

Cracks have long been spreading from the Power Vertical which dissects Russia. This system of vertical relationships largely boils down to all funds being extracted from federal republics, and the feds giving out from the general pile a little bit to everyone. For example, the Komi Republic, which has been suffering from oil spills for many years, has not seen oil revenues since the 1990s. And in 2009, the feds shaved off the remaining 5% of the tax on the extraction of minerals left to the republic. The lion's share of mining taxes goes where the head offices of companies are located, that is, most often in Moscow.

Thus, a resource-rich region finds itself in the role of a freeloader with a begging bowl. To understand this problem, a local does not need to be an economic expert.

In Russia, the phrase “The capital has blossomed under Mayor Sergei Sobyenin” has already become a meme, and Muscovites themselves put irony into it. However, the situation looks different in the perspective of those who live elsewhere: Moscow is flourishing against the background of the rest of the country’s impoverishment. To see how the capital has blossomed, one does not need to understand economic reports and consult statistics: the difference between Moscow and other places is obvious. The very comparison of the standard of living in Moscow and outside demonstrates the vampiric nature of the Putin regime.

Soon another difference will become apparent, which has nothing to do with the economy: the mobilized will begin to return from the front and the fact that the rich have been hiding behind the poor in this war will become much more salient and obvious to the majority. It is important to realize that this fundamental divide was initiated by the federal government, which subsequently did everything to expand and deepen it. The point is not even how likely the centrifugal process is in the foreseeable future, but whether it can be somehow avoided.

## **Dissatisfaction with the Kremlin Protégés**

In September 2021, state employees in Komi were forced to take part in parliamentary elections. Oleg Mikhailov from the regional fraction of the Communist Party and Olga Savostyanova from United Russia ran for the State Duma. It was assumed that state employees, as usual, would provide support to the ruling party. However, they seem to have favored the opposition candidate. Mikhailov, who by then was known as an opposition figure who supported the environmental protest in Shies, called at rallies to stop “feeding Moscow” and advocated the replacement of worn out oil pipelines in Komi.

The fact that state employees came to the elections with tongue in cheek was discussed literally the next day after the voting. In a region with a small population, where everyone is in plain sight, it is virtually impossible to hide such sentiments.



Two unpopular politicians were exiled to be the republic's leaders twice in a row. The feds had to remove Sergei Gaplikov from office ahead of time, as he failed the fight against COVID-19 and became notorious for stage dancing, friendship with the odious Archbishop Pitirim (Volochnikov) and a rough treatment of subordinates.

His successor Vladimir Uiba was initially positioned as an intelligent doctor but was able to win the 2020 election in the Komi Republic by only competing with shill candidates. Unwanted Mikhailov was then denied access to the elections for unsubstantial reasons. Uiba managed to outdo Gaplikov when he said "I am your Putin" in response to a complaint from the residents of the Usinsky district about another oil spill. Another scandal burst in April 2021, as Mikhailov, leader of the Republican committee, accused Uiba of a fraudulent election victory. The latter, already on the sidelines, swore at his opponent and called him a horse. The president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov had to stand up for the governor.

The public reaction in Komi was quite unambiguous: the behaviour of the Kremlin protégés caused outrage, and Mikhailov scored political points. After winning the elections to the State Duma, he gave an interview to North.Realities, where, once again, he expressed his anti-colonial position: "We aim to fight the colonial system. The situation when taxes go from the subjects of the federation to the federal centre is absolutely abnormal: up to two thirds of the wealth leaves the Komi Republic. We are in fact a colonial appendage of the Russian Federation. This is wrong."

Uiba, appointed by the feds, became widely known for owing a business in the Czech Republic and being involved in corruption scandals around the construction of the Vostochny cosmodrome. Such a background is not surprising for Komi; governors are believed to be sent here not so much for feeding as for exile.

After his recent trip to the Donetsk region, Uiba again became an object of ridicule, boasting that he deftly dodged six HIMARS missiles. The war has not rallied people around the local government; the governors sent from Moscow are still perceived by many locals as an insult.

At the same time, local telegram channels are a constant reminder about the feds' appetites and the failed economic policy of the local government. One of them, with the telling name New Republic, analyses the local budget for 2023-25 and reports that "Moscow will take more and give less." On January 31, Oleg Mikhailov published a post on his official page saying that after an accident at a sewage treatment plant Uiba should either declare a state of emergency in Vorkuta or resign. The dramatic struggle with Moscow's henchmen has not subsided since 2016, when the former head of Olympstroy, Sergei Gaplikov, became the head of the republic.

It is worth mentioning that besides environmental issues, social problems cause outrage as well. Ethnic tensions remain very painful too.

## **Ethnic Response**

According to the 2010 census, 23.7% of the residents of the republic are Komi. In the 2022 census, their number may decrease significantly, not so much because they have become fewer, but because the census takers did not ask people about their ethnic identity. Some of the participants complained that their ethnicity was recorded only if they asked for it themselves. Some noticed that they were put down as Russian, although they identify as Komi. Demographer Alexey Raksha called this latest census crooked because of its poor quality.

Suspensions of the authorities artificially diminishing the indigenous population arise against the background of continuing rumours about the merger of the republic with the Arkhangelsk region, or about the abolition of national republics as such. As is now widely known, they appeared after the 1917 October Revolution and owe their birth to Vladimir Lenin. A year ago, Vladimir Putin used this as a justification to question the statehood of Ukraine and start the war.

Naturally, this causes constant anxiety and suspicions that the national republics may share the fate of the Uighur Autonomous Region of China, now known as Xinjiang.

After the compulsory inclusion in the school curriculum of national languages was abolished in 2017, a wave of protests swept through Komi. In 2021, Alexey Ivanov, whom the court fined for participating in a rally in support of Alexei Navalny, demanded that the case

be considered in Komi and refused to speak Russian, which outraged the judge. This case has become widely known outside the republic.

In 2022, Viktor Vorobyov, later designated a foreign agent, and Nikolai Bratenkov, both deputies of the Komi Parliament from the Communist Party, openly spoke out against the war in Ukraine on social media. The anti-war position is shared by many channels that cover Komi culture, history, and language, for example Komi Daily.

The ethnic tensions in Komi have become so painful that any pressure from the centre can cause a fierce response.

Can the anti-colonial rhetoric in Komi lead to the republic's separation from Russia? In theory it is possible, as the republic has a formal state structure, including its own constitution. However, geographically, it is more likely to become an enclave state. In addition, the internal demand for their own statehood is rather marginal. But will the republic demand greater federalization and greater economic and political freedoms? I have no doubt it will. As soon as the federal government begins to weaken, the republic, like many other republics and regions, will actively fight to regain their rights.



ROLAN AVDEEV

## THE PACIFIC REPUBLIC

Characteristics of regionalism  
in the Far East and the ethnic  
composition of the region



When speaking of the decolonization of Russia, it is often assumed that the “minor” peoples have already been given the understanding that they do not belong to the Great Russian culture, which is nothing more than an unavoidable context. Meanwhile, the problems of infrastructure, poverty, and the population’s debt burden, which create the grounds for recruiting into the army (as mentioned, for example, by Buryat activist Victoria Maladaeva), apply equally to the republics and to the remote “Russian” oblasts. National identity, understood as perceived distinct similarities between members of a given group, does not necessarily require a separate ethnicity or phenotype, but can be constructed around any “imaginary” (according to Benedict Anderson) attribute. Therefore, without questioning the importance and particularity of the problems of indigenous peoples of the Far East, I would like to draw attention below to the fact that many of the problems raised in this regard relate not only to the national republics of the Russian Federation, but also to the regions that are considered “Russian,” primarily the regions and territories of the Russian Far East (1).

## **The so-called Russian Far East**

I will try to delineate the attitude of “Russian” residents of the Far Eastern region. Let’s assume that we who live in the Russian Far East really define ourselves as “Russians.” Then it turns out that our typically Russian nature is long birches and wide fields as far as the eye can see, our typically Russian poetry is Yesenin’s poems about those birches, our typically Russian painting is landscapes with those birches, our typically Russian architecture is Russian architecture and the Orthodox church, and the typical, truly Russian city is the city built around that church. This is what we learn in schools as our culture.

From Moscow, you can hardly see what the problem is here. But there is a problem, and it consists of the fact that all this does not match the actual state of affairs. Nowhere in the Far East is there this fauna, this climate, and the local cities have not been formed around churches for hundreds of years; you will only find objects of Russian architecture here as an exception. Russian history, which we have to call ours, occurred in places very far away from us, where only some of us will visit on vacation. This other being defines another consciousness. A person in Suzdal, coming out of school, almost literally breathes this air. A “Russian” resident of the “Russian” Far East, understanding such

Russian culture — something lying 7,000 km away—as her own, cannot quite feel herself either as part of that culture or part of that place. From childhood, everyone here internalizes that real life has happened and is happening there. We are called “Far Easterners”— those who live far from Moscow.

Russian nationalists also lament the insufficiency of Great Russian propaganda in the Far East:

“Someone will say that they opened a park in Vladivostok called ‘Russia — My History’... But you can open ten parks and still install statues of Buddhas and open McDonald’s and KFCs, which carry a much more powerful ideological charge than the rather boring ‘Russia — My History’ pavilions. It is possible to hold ‘tiger days’ and support, at the state level, blatant enemies who pose great threats to Russia in the Far East.”  
(italics mine)

“Even that is completely ignored: a considerable part of the toponyms in Primorye and Priamurye are of Orthodox origin...even in Soviet times there was no doubt about the state-forming, civilizational and cultural role of the Russian people in the Far East.”

There is a “Russian People’s Line,” whose supporters from the city of Ussuriysk have succeeded in their denouncement to such an extent that they have even attacked Vasily Avchenko, a quite patriotic writer and exoticist of the region, and the “Pacific Russia” discussion club, an absolutely pocket-sized patriotic project run by the Russian Union of Journalists on the premises of the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the Far East (2). The authors are right—indeed, you can open as many patriotic parks as you like and to no avail. But the biased thinking of these Russian nationalists makes them hope that the effect can still be achieved if the Great Russian culture in the Far East has no competitors in the form of Buddhas and fast food. That the competitor of this Moscow propaganda is life itself, the very everyday existence of people, they cannot see.

Meanwhile, the so-called “Far East” of Russia has its own unique culture. It’s not only the Russian-speaking culture, emerging solely with the beginning of Russian colonization of these lands, but, first and foremost, the ancient civilizations, which are much older than Kievan Rus. Therefore, it is especially strange to listen to residents of Primorye

or the Khabarovsk Krai who support the return of “native Russian” lands in Ukraine. All of this is ignored in school curriculum. It had its own revolution, its own history of the Civil War, its own history of the formation of Soviet power. The quintessential Far Eastern subjectivity for many here is the phenomenon of the Far Eastern Republic of 1920-1922. They try not to talk about it in schools, but everyone remembers it. Regardless of who takes which side about certain moments in history, shifting the geographical emphasis would clearly reduce the degree of alienation, increase the “fund” of motivation to stay in one’s native land, and increase the degree of solidarity among all residents of the Far East, regardless of nationality.

## **“Russians” in the Far Eastern Regions**

Above I said “let’s assume” because “Russians” in this context is a factitious notion. In reality, there are many Ukrainians living in the Russian Far East. According to the 2010 census, a total of 2.28% of Ukrainians, or more precisely, those who call themselves Ukrainians, lived in the Primorsky and Khabarovsk Krai, as well as in the Amur and Sakhalin Oblasts. And in this light, official statistics reveal their inadequacy, because the Ukrainian “element” is being squeezed out of Far Eastern culture both by the intentional actions of the authorities and by the overall background: the spirit of Great Russian chauvinism. For comparison, in 1989 in the same regions Ukrainians were 7.1%, in 1959—10%. The 2021 census showed an even more catastrophic decrease in the number of Ukrainians. For example, in Khabarovsk Krai — from 26 thousand in 2010 to 7 thousand in 2021.

In order to have a true understanding of the number of Ukrainians in the Far East, it is enough to turn to history and see how masses of Ukrainians came to the Far East from all over Ukraine. Before the Revolution it was mainly migration of peasants, and after 1917 and during World War II Ukrainian workers also settled in the Far East. Toponyms preserve the memory of it. Primorsky Krai has its own Livadiya; there is a village called Chernigovka, founded by Ukrainians from Chernihiv; the village called Boguslavka, in honor of the city of Boguslavets; there is Kyevka, Chuguevka, Slavyanka, Khorol, etc. In 1923, the ratio of Ukrainians to Russians was 31% to 39% in the entire Far East. The quintessential Far Eastern Ukrainian subject is the political entity that emerged after the February Revolution, the All-Ukrainian Congress of Zelenyi



Klyn (Green Ukraine).

In 2014, Evgeniya Kulgina wrote about the Ukrainian community “Krynitsya” in Khabarovsk Krai with its choir and the center of Ukrainian culture called “Gorlytsia” in Vladivostok. Until 2014, I remember all different kinds of cultural events: in schools, children learned how certain settlements and their names arose, and in general, the topic of Ukrainian resettlement was familiar to everyone. Since 2014 this is no longer the case: the methodical squeezing out of Ukrainian culture has begun. In the same year in Khabarovsk readings were held in honor of the bicentennial of Taras Shevchenko and a press conference of the organizers was suddenly canceled without any explanation. In 2015, the director of the “Batkivska Krynitsya” choir was fired after she took a trip to Kyiv, and the festival of Ukrainian culture, “Schedry Veche,” which “Gorlytsia” still holds in Vladivostok, is no longer held as a Ukrainian festival but as a kind of “Christmas festival” in which children listen to about Russian Orthodox traditions. If you add to this the slop that federal propaganda pours on Ukraine and the Ukrainian identity, and the resurgence of garden-variety Ukrainophobia, such a small percentage of Ukrainians in the Far Eastern population is no surprise. I have acquaintances who have clear Ukrainian roots or were even born in Ukraine, but call themselves Russians.

There is another large group of immigrants — Koreans, or so-called “Russian Koreans.” Their main locations are Primorye and Sakhalin. According to official data in 2010, even on Sakhalin there were only 5% of them. However, if you find yourself on the island, this figure will seem strange to you: you will see Koreans literally everywhere. There is a Center for Korean Culture in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and it is the only institution I know of. Despite the fact that Koreans have a clear phenotypic difference, the same can be applied to them as stated above about Ukrainians. Imagine that as a Russian you were born somewhere in the depths of China, let’s assume in Xining, and there are quite enough Russians like you there that you constantly meet people who look like you on the street. All of you from your childhood go to Chinese schools, where you learn Chinese history and traditions; you have never been to Russia, you don’t know the language, and you don’t even need it. What are you most likely to call yourself if asked? In Russia, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that propaganda presents Russianness not as a nationality, but as a supra-nationality:

“Russian is not a nationality, but a state of mind.” Russian Koreans as a phenotype and as a cultural identity exist in significant volume, which is the basis for the emergence of a political identity(3).

## **Political articulation of the problem**

Speaking of how cultural non-representation leads to political dissociation, I will limit myself to one example that is best known to everyone in Russia: the 2020 rallies in Khabarovsk Krai over the arrest of Governor Sergei Furgal, which had spread a bit to Vladivostok. It is not worth thinking that people grieved over a system official from a puppet party and were sure of his innocence. Whether or not Furgal was substantively accused didn't really matter. The discontent had been building up for many years. As a result of the demarcation of the Russian-Chinese border under Putin, the dacha plots of Khabarovsk residents ended up in China with 337 square kilometers gone. China also received a 50-year lease on 3.5 million hectares of land with rights to conduct agricultural activities and deforestation. The latter is a particularly sore point. Perhaps Sakhalin residents do not feel as sorry for their gas as the Primorsky and Khabarovsk residents do for their forests [Note: Oil and gas development projects Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 still implemented with the participation of foreign capital have been criticized for harming the environment]. Mass deforestation has long been affecting the climate; winds and waterlogging of areas that never existed before have appeared.

A similar story to Furgal's happened before with Governor Khoroshavin of Sakhalin and was being prepared for Governor Daryakin of Primorye; the fate of every mayor of Vladivostok ends similarly. Thus, environmental and economic problems are compounded by a general misunderstanding of these ostentatious trials—they may be criminals, but why are they being tried on the other side of the earth? And why is it on the same side of the earth that the beneficiaries of the profits from fish and timber sales are? And why, at the request of one Putin lackey, can someone just reassign the center of the FEFD? Against this backdrop, it's clear that Furgal simply became a release trigger.

The case of Kamchatka LGBT activist Dmitry Samoilenko is also noteworthy. In 2016, he and his colleagues published a booklet titled “Traditional Sexual Behaviors among Indigenous Peoples of the

North,” where they showed how homosexuality and transgenderism were developed among Kamchadars based on data from Russian colonists. They tried to hang a grave case of extremism on him for this: he “insulted” the indigenous population. The last I knew about Dimitri was that he was collecting help to pay fines for anti-war activism.

Regarding the problem of disproportionate power between the Center and the regions, which is relevant not only for the Far East, much can be understood if we look at it through the prism of differentiation between the public and the private. Today, the “federation” in Russia has effectively been abolished. In this Russia, only what happens in Moscow or between Moscow and the regions is public. What happens inside the region remains in the private sphere. Today in the Russian Federation, a region is not a subject of the federation, but a fiefdom handed down by the tsar (Moscow) to a voivode (governor). The main task of the latter is to constantly demonstrate to the center that he is the only authority in the entrusted territory and controls everything, therefore, is able to guarantee loyalty (4). The real conditions for the reproduction of state power in a subject of the federation thus lie not in the subject itself, but in Moscow, and boil down to sending the right numbers to the Center, sprucing up the necessary avenues before a visit from the prime minister or president, and demonstrating the loyalty of the population.

So, Moscow is public, the region is private. Protests in the regional center are the governor’s private problem. As something public, they are perceived only if they fall into the focus of the central media, but again, only because in this case they touch on the relationship between the authorities of the region and the central government. Therefore, it makes no sense for the residents of the Russian “periphery” to come out to their authorities with demands, for example, passing a law on domestic violence and repealing discriminatory laws against LGBT+ people, while in Moscow and St. Petersburg sufficiently strong protests could at least hypothetically change this situation even in the absence of activity in the rest of the country. On the other hand, no matter how big such a protest might turn out to be, the authorities’ last argument against progressive demands will refer to the regional loyalty and “traditional” culture of Southern Russia and the North Caucasus. And in turn, the lack of LGBT+, fem-, and other activism in these regions is a (private) concern of the local authorities (“no gays in Chechnya”).

## Asia-Pacific States

As a rule, those who speculate about this problem limit themselves to rather “neat” conclusions. For example, the already mentioned Victoria Maladayeva, in an interview with Beda.Media, speaks of a “real federation.” Remaining in solidarity with Victoria, I want to go further and say: no “real federation” with Moscow is possible. Our history has repeatedly shown that the compromising solutions of such contradictions ultimately end in the victory of “that true Russian man, the great Russian chauvinist, in essence a scoundrel and rapist, which is a typical Russian bureaucrat,” deteriorating into the domination of the Russian-European culture as a universal one. Its spirit was laid down by Ivan III; its methods of government were taken from the “school of Mongol slavery.” This universal chauvinist culture will continue to mask the resource exploitation of the country’s outskirts. Therefore, the solution to this problem can lie only in the political plane. The elimination of imperial consciousness is possible only through the elimination of the empire itself. Only in this way can the outskirts cease to be the outskirts and the Far East cease to be the Far East. And this freedom will not only be for “Far Easterners,” but also for the residents of nominal Central Russia.

The simulacrum of the “Russian world” is based on the concept of a “land power,” a “great country.” This is where the solution lies. Political and economic autonomy is needed in the territory from the Sakha to the Pacific coast, with the ability to adopt their own laws on all issues, the nationalization of raw materials and major industrial sectors or their transfer to direct civil ownership, and a separate center for the issuing of money. The working names of this entity could be the Asia-Pacific States, or the Asia-Pacific Socialist States, or the Pacific Federal Republic. The languages of the national republics, along with Russian, Ukrainian, and Korean, should be taken as the languages of the state-bureaucracy in this territory. The relative homogeneity of the economic development of the regions of the Far East minimizes the likelihood of the future dominance of any one part of the region and the emergence of an analog of the “north-south” or “center-periphery” problem.

Along with this, the preservation of a single economic space with free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor based on the good neighborly relations between all parts of Russia are necessary throughout the country. Therefore, I also support the idea of the entry of such a new

entity into an economic, military, and partly political union with other macro-entities of the Russian Federation — Siberia, the Urals, etc. If there is any place for the historical and economic “Russia” in the future, it can only be as such.

Taken together, these requirements can change the conditions for the reproduction of power in the regions, that is, they will allow regional residents, primarily the working class and small businesses, to come closer to managing their own resources and the conditions of their production and existence without severing economic ties or reducing labor productivity.

1. This text was my outline of a personal discussion of the issue raised here with some philosophers, workers, professors, historians, students, cultural institution workers, school teachers, and activists from various regions of the Far Eastern Federal District.

2. If anyone has two hours of free time, for an understanding of the situation, I suggest watching an utterly cringe-worthy round table of this club, “The National Idea: Between Past and Future.”

3. In the context of everything stated above, I see a special symbolism in Vitaly Kim, the head of the administration of the Mykolayiv Oblast of Ukraine, who is of Korean descent.

4. The so-called khozyaistvennik, or a can-do manager, is still the Soviet concept of an apolitical administrator who ensures the achievement of “key” indicators of economic growth in the territory entrusted to him. In his activities, the “a can-do manager” can resort to any means of violence and coercion, as long as these facts do not surface in the public arena. It was the Soviet khozyaistvennik who transformed into the “statesman” of a post-Soviet Russia.



ALYA DENISENKO



## THE CHINESE DREAM FOR RUSSIAN PEOPLE

Meaning of imaginary China  
for Russians justifying  
the war in Ukraine

Support and justification for the war in Ukraine draw upon a wide range of ideas (even myths) about international relations, economics, and politics. When reflecting on the current situation, the causes and consequences of the war, the present, future and past, respondents employ a variety of constructs and imagery to make sense of what is unfolding. China — or rather, the constructed image of China — plays an important role in shaping the perspective of Russians who express support for, or who do not oppose, the war in Ukraine.

Though I have encountered references to China when discussing the war in both social networks and personal communications, for this text I focus on in-depth interviews collected as part of the Public Sociology Lab project, which explores how Russians perceive the war in Ukraine. (The full-scale invasion of Ukraine started on February 24, 2022; interviews were collected from the end of February 2022 to December 2022.) After analyzing 301 interviews, I found that those who support the war or do not oppose it (122 interviews and 40 follow-up interviews) mention China mainly in two contexts. The first is in response to questions concerning what kind of future the respondents would like for Russia. The second is while reflecting on China as an ally of Russia. During the interviews, respondents were asked about their perspective on why the war started, their attitudes towards the conflict, sanctions, the potential for a nuclear strike, the future of Russia, and their vision of how they see the war ending. As the interviewers did not explicitly mention China in their questions, the topic of China was spontaneously introduced by the respondents themselves.

## **Just like in China**

The mention of China in discussions about what kind of future proponents of the war want for Russia provides an opportunity to analyze their ideas (and myths) about China. An analysis of respondents' statements shows that their image of China makes it possible to create an optimistic picture of Russia's future. Such a picture of Russia's future is important, since for many respondents support or non-opposition to the war is based precisely on confidence or hope that Russia has chosen the right path. For some who support the war, including those who initially took a neutral or uncertain position but then became so-called "new patriots" ("need to continue the war to the end, to support your own country, and not to feel guilty"), it is this vision of the



future of Russia that becomes the basis of support. The war is seen either as something inevitable or as an event that has already happened, an event that gives Russia a chance for a revival and the acquisition of “true independence” (parts 2.1.4, 2.1.6 in the second report of PS Lab — at the moment only available in Russian; the first report — interviews from March to June 2022 — is available in English here).

The idea of China’s economic independence or self-sufficiency looks especially attractive to informants. For instance, to the question “What kind of future does Russia need and how to achieve it?”, in November 2022, a 32-year-old resident of the Yaroslavl Region answers:

I personally do not see any other way out [of the situation] than some kind of a big leap forward, [...] so that later we can have some autarky, like China, so that we can produce our own goods, or so that we would have trade partners, like the Chinese, who we could live off. There is no other way, otherwise — new sanctions and that’s it.

In this context, the term “autarky” is used not as a theoretical concept meaning an extremely closed economy, but rather as a desired economic self-sufficiency of the country, symbolizing independence and dignity.

Another respondent, a 45-year-old resident of Arkhangelsk Region (in the north of Russia), in April 2022 gives an even more detailed answer to the same question about the future of Russia:

[I would like] for the country to have its own factories, its own production of absolutely everything, regardless of oil and gas. A fully self-sufficient country, both in terms of energy and finance, and with a convertible ruble. That is, to be a country that would be independent. For example, if we look at China. At some point America declared economic war on China. It was a big deal. It was a long time ago, back in the 1990s. And China took on this challenge and took this economic war so seriously that when you look at China today, you think: yes, that’s a really well-established, independent power. And we [Russia], by the way, used to help this power with everything, when it was a backward country.

The interesting thing about such quotes is not that people can make mistakes in factual information: Trump declared economic/trade war on China in 2018, but by that time the so-called Chinese economic

miracle had already taken place, and China had shown the world's highest economic growth rates for 33 years. The interesting thing is that self-sufficiency and economic independence, taken almost in absolute terms ("its own factories, its own production of absolutely everything, a convertible ruble, energy and financial independence"), is the future desired by a respondent who supports the war (not, for example, expansion of territories). Expected or hoped-for economic self-sufficiency and self-reliance ("like in China") — guarantee the country the desirable status of "well-established independent power" and become an important element in justifying support for the war.

At the same time, in using this image of China as a reference point, it is not only the concept of economic self-sufficiency that is attractive to respondents, but also the concepts of "isolation" and "closedness". Some respondents who support the war are not afraid of Russia's isolation, for example, in the field of education, because they actually attribute China's success to isolation. Answering the question about the risk of isolation and how this may affect education in Russia, in November 2022, a 39-year-old respondent argues as follows:

To put it simply, in the Soviet Union there was the Iron Curtain, yet we had the best specialists. Or we can compare this on the level of other republics. I mean, China is also isolated. But look at it now: over the last 10 years, China has grown dramatically, it has surpassed us [Russia].

China's political system is extremely closed: it is almost unknown how political decisions are made or how intra-party struggles take place. But economically, since 1979, China has not been an isolated country. It is an open country without an Iron Curtain, where it is precisely the flow of people, ideas, and money both into and out of the country — through the overseas Chinese diaspora and multiple international projects — that has ensured China's development. China, as one of the main beneficiaries of globalization, has maximized the benefits for itself from both openness to investment and the volume of exports to other countries. It only started talking seriously about self-sufficiency in the high-tech sector after cooling relations with the United States (such as the US ban on the purchase of 5G technology from Huawei in 2019 and the subsequent ban on the sale of chips to China).

Answers such as those quoted above demonstrate why some supporters of the war may not be concerned about the possibility of complete isolation of Russia because they believe it could actually lead to Russia's development, independence, and self-sufficiency. They view China's success as proof that isolation and closedness can be the right path, despite evidence to the contrary.

Many experts point out that Kremlin propaganda has been unable to produce a vision of the future to offer to Russians. Kremlin propaganda promotes its agenda against "the Collective West" (NATO, Europe, the United States), but does not provide an alternative ideology or any clear idea of where the country is going. In such an ideological vacuum, for some, the image of China becomes a reference point for successful development of Russia, and thus justifies the regime's actions. In Russia today, this type of image is ideologically approved: "Russia's turn to the East" has been going on for 10 years, Russian-Chinese cooperation is positively viewed in the propaganda, and China is currently seen as a good ally. Circulating past cliché about China as the "Soviet Union's younger brother" makes it possible to imagine an affinity between China and Russia, and the belief that China too is "isolated" makes it possible to believe that the path chosen by the current Russian regime is similar to the path once chosen by China. Moreover, the resentment towards the United States/"Collective West" that some Russians have prompts them to look for something to serve as the basis for their adversarial position against the West. "Traditional values" preached by propaganda in many cases are not effective, but a mental alliance with a strong player — China — gives a more solid ideological basis.

The reason why China — a country very different from Russia in terms of demography, economic strategy, and political governance, not to mention social structure and culture — can be seen as a reference point for Russia's future is an imagined historical and ideological affinity between Russia and China. The fact that China is a big non-Western authoritarian country (like Russia) makes this imagined affinity easier, but it is the common communist/socialist past with China that enables respondents to build the logic in which economically successful and "fully self-sufficient" China now becomes an image for the future of Russia. It becomes some kind of alternative history of the USSR: without the collapse in 1991, without that period of fascination with "Western values and democracy," without the traumas of the 1990s and

the mistakes after which “the West stopped having respect or fear for us.” (Respondents do not talk about North Korea, Iran, or Belarus as appealing examples of isolation or autarky. These countries can be mentioned as possible allies of Russia, but having not demonstrated economic success, they are not mentioned as reference points for Russia’s future development.)

The image of a successful China is also used when some respondents talk about censorship and state violence in Russia and do not express any disapproval of it. The reason is that the economic success of China is attributed not to its multifaceted economic policy and pragmatism but to its “ruthlessness” and “dictatorship.” For instance, in October 2022, a respondent who is originally from Vladivostok (in the east of Russia) but now resides in St. Petersburg argues the following:

Now the Chinese, they feel great, they simply don’t care [about current international problems]. They managed to isolate themselves from the rest of the world for some time, and now nothing happens in the world without China. Take even iPhones, the phones that you and I are using to communicate, they are all made in China. Leaders of the country [China] simply started focusing on their people at some point. Yeah, things are ruthless there, they still have executions there. But, damn, there is no such thing as democracy, and there never will be. Dictatorship and tyranny — for some reason, these are the only things that develop countries.

Both “democracy” and “dictatorship” here are terms that do not have a concrete meaning, but do have enormous symbolic power. “There is no such thing as democracy, and there never will be” is the emotional phraseology of a person who believed in a miracle, but the miracle never happened. The phraseology where the denial and impossibility of an ideal construct drives to the opposite pole (“dictatorship and tyranny — for some reason, these are the only things that develop countries”). Such thinking — possibly full of disappointment and confusion — also represents a simplified and naive view of the world. To the West of Russia — democracy, but there is disappointment there, it is all mirage there. We have been there, and we did not like it. And to the East of Russia (China) — dictatorship and tyranny, and they develop countries. We have been there, we should get back there.

The appeal of “dictatorship” and “tyranny” operates more generally within a cult of strength shared by many respondents who support the war in Ukraine. The image of strength is also an important element in how people see China. In March 2022, another respondent from St. Petersburg, while talking about sanctions imposed on Russia, uses China as an example to make his point:

They can't talk to China like that, so China does whatever it wants. China took over Tibet without having to suffer any consequences, China took over Inner Mongolia without having to suffer any consequences. China is now doing ethnic cleansing and seriously looking at Taiwan. Why? They can do that, because they are too strong. [...] Putin has been disliked by the West for decades, but Western companies were not leaving Russia. And again, look at China, Western companies have had no issue doing business in China. They continue working there without any problems. No one is trying through sanctions to make Chinese people overthrow the Communist Party, although [western companies/countries] might not like it either.

Global business often is unethical and willing to do business with anyone, as long as reputational do not translate into financial costs, and that makes the respondent wonder: Western companies might not have liked Putin before the war, but they stayed in Russia. Business stays in China no matter what. So the solution to this problem is to become “like China”: stronger and more powerful.

It is useful to mention here that the Chinese market, in terms of both production and consumption, is indeed a really powerful actor. According to some estimates, in 2018 China's middle class was 707 million people, and that is a highly attractive market for global companies that can turn a blind eye to human rights violations in China in pursuit of profit. But even following this cynical logic, it is not clear what Russia with its declining (at unknown pace) population of 140 million people has to do with it.

## **China as an ally**

China is mentioned as an ally most often in discussion of recently imposed sanctions on Russia. Respondents who express support or non-opposition to the war in Ukraine express a positive attitude

to the role of China as ally and partner, and have an optimistic view on future cooperation between Russia and China. For example, in March 2022, a 60-year old female respondent from Moscow talked about sanctions in the following way:

Russia is a big country with lots of natural resources. Sooner or later we will get out of this crisis. I don't want to use bad language, but the more they put down Russia, the more resilient it gets, I think. We won't be able to produce everything we need, like automobiles, for example. But there's the East, there's South Korea, China.

And here is a response from a 41-year-old female respondent, also from Moscow, in April 2022:

With the sanctions, I think they [the West] are biting their own tail, and punishing themselves with these sanctions. That's a difficult path for us, for sure. I hope we will be able to stand strong despite the sanctions. And I really hope that for those things that we haven't produced ourselves yet or have forgotten how to make since Soviet times, that their production will be revived. Or we will find ways to cooperate with China, India, so that we can pull through this difficult situation, and not lose, but only gain.

In October 2022, a respondent from Yoshkar-Ola (central Russia) gives credit to Putin for forming a "major coalition" in the East, yet points out that there are doubts about China as an ally:

First of all, we have really boosted the entire Eastern region, uniting it into one powerful force. Another major coalition has emerged in the world thanks to this. And the idea was actually Putin's. We have very good relations with China. Well, the Chinese are of course looking for their own benefits, but at the moment at least our relations with them are still quite friendly.

It is noteworthy that while talking about China as an ally, the respondent emphasizes the temporary nature of the current moment, saying that "at the moment at least our relations with them are still quite friendly."

Some respondents realize that China is a more powerful and influential country than Russia, and that Russia enters this relationship

in a weak position. In March 2022, a respondent from Kazan (western Russia) says that Russia cannot compete economically with two “superpowers” (the United States and China), and that is why it should “focus on inside the country and work inside its own economy and keep developing it.” In the meantime (while the economy is still weak) we “should stick to our partner.”

How should Russia act in this situation? We should stick to our partner. We’ve been telling China for a long time that we are friends. And China also considers us their ally and friend. In this situation, one must be friends with the strong. When China was small and weak, it was friends with the strong Soviet Union, which helped China throughout many years. [...] Now we have swapped positions.

The same respondent, in a follow-up interview in October 2022, talking about how the world has changed since February 24, 2022, continues to see advantages for Russia in the current international situation. Opposition to American influence becomes the main theme (“the world now understands that it doesn’t have to give in to Yanks” [the derogatory word *pindos* is used]). In such a situation, the dynamics of Russia-China relations are considered solely in the current moment, and all risks are postponed till later in exchange for having allies now:

Even here in our city, you can now easily buy yuan at the bank without any restrictions. Chinese companies, so to speak, already have us in yuan. So when China begins to take us over, it will become a problem between China and Russia. And that will be a different issue. But for now, business is quietly going on, as is diplomacy with eastern countries.

The phrase “when China begins to take us over” is a reference to fears that have been circulating in Russian society for some time that China may take over parts of Russian territory. But these fears circulate as an abstract idea. On the one hand, it is an abstract idea devoid of historical context. The memory of the Damansky Island conflict (the Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969) is either weak or has not been actively shaped and boosted by propaganda. A new demarcation of the China-Russian border took place in 2005 with Putin already in power. This entailed the transfer to China of 337 square kilometers of land together with plots and summer cottages that used to belong to Russian citizens. This memory is still vivid for residents of the regions of South Siberia and

the Far East, but is barely known to those who live far from the border with China. On the other hand, it is an abstract idea devoid of contemporary context. In order to understand how China can “take over” Russia in future (or has already been taking over), it is necessary to thoroughly analyze the economic and social situation in regions bordering China, and the Russian economy in general. But the state media and propaganda are not interested in such an analysis.

In relation to such statements, it is essential to emphasize two points. First, overall animosity towards the United States (and general resentment towards “the West”), together with current war fever, becomes a valid reason to plunge into a relationship with a country, whose motives and strategies raise suspicion. Second, there is a deliberate focus on the present moment and acknowledgment that contemplation and analysis of the situation are postponed to an indefinite point in the future. Unwillingness or inability to consider the consequences of their own actions and those of the country’s leadership channel discussion of the real geopolitical situation and the real consequences of today’s decisions into “wait and see” mode (more about this is here). Thoughts driven by resentment and reflexes also limit the temporality of decision-making in such complex questions as building future strategy. In October 2022, a respondent from St. Petersburg, who admires Ukrainian culture yet supports the war and sees advantages of it for Russia, reflects on their own position in the current situation:

Our views change throughout our lives. It is only on my deathbed that I will be able to say how mine will be formed. And now anything can happen... Perhaps it will turn out that Uncle Putin sold us all to the Chinese, and all of this is being done to create new biolaboratories in Ukraine to turn us into cyborgs. Who knows? There are all sorts of fantastic theories. But for now, we watch and help in any way we can.

The space for decision-making is pushed back and doesn’t even begin where a red line might be, but is relegated to the category of the fantastic (maybe Uncle Putin sold us all to the Chinese [...]to create new biolaboratories in Ukraine to turn us into cyborgs).



\*

The beliefs held by most Russians concerning China are influenced by texts and factual information that circulate within a media space defined and controlled by the Kremlin. Russian propaganda is the main source for the myths about China espoused by Russians who do not oppose the war. This includes the limited availability of extensive or critical information about China in Russian state media, and, at times, simple reprinting of Chinese propaganda. Rather than providing comprehensive and nuanced discussion about China, the narrative presented is one of success without explanations, a tale of wishful thinking.

The constructed image of China — portrayed as isolated, self-sufficient, and economically successful, with the ability to dictate terms from a position of power — is also a desired future for Russia. This particular image not only fills the ideological void when envisioning the future of Russia, but also serves to legitimize and justify the ongoing war. It looks past and beyond the realities and horrors of war, into the distance towards an imaginary future. This perspective provides a sense of comfort by fostering belief in a planned and rational progress towards self-sufficiency, “true independence,” and economic prosperity. Furthermore, reliance on the image of another country — a strong China as a reference point — also enables a feeling of collective opposition: we are not alone, we are together, with China, against the West. It relies on an imagined “just-so” story of another country’s success, which has little to do with Russia’s own potential for future development, nor, for that matter, with the real history of China’s success. Ironically, following the lead of the admittedly stronger ally in the Russia–China relationship (“we should stick to our partner,” “one must be friends with the strong”), while acknowledging the risks of such cooperation (“when China begins to take over us, it will be a different issue”), contradicts the desired ideals of “self-sufficiency” and “independence” that form the bedrock of support for the war. Adopting a “wait and see” mindset not only defers difficult decisions that must eventually be made, but also absolves from taking responsibility.



ALENA SOIKO



**PAYING BY THE TONNE:  
FIRST TOLLS THEN THE WAR**

Russian haulage and long-haul  
truck drivers before and after  
the outbreak of war

## The new toll system

“Platon” is the name of the automated system for collecting tolls on federal roads. It was introduced in Russia on 15 November 2015. The Government justified this measure by the damage caused to public highways by heavy goods vehicles. The name “Platon,” which literally means “toll per tonne,” does not reflect the system’s true purpose. Practically, everybody pays the same: there is only the lower 12-tonne limit, while the final amount depends on how many kilometers the truck travels on federal highways. The funds collected are meant to be transferred to the federal road fund and cover the maintenance and construction costs of federal roads.

It was decided that private businesses should implement the project. The Rosavtodor (the Federal Road Transport Agency) entered into an agreement with the private company RT-Invest Transport Systems, which deals in “modernizing” haulage. A dollar billionaire, Arkady Rotenberg’s eldest son Igor, owns 23.5 percent of that company. Another 19% belongs to Andrei Shepelov: his businesses are monopolists in the collection, sorting and disposal of waste in Tatarstan and throughout Moscow. The Rostec state corporation owns 25.5% in RT-Invest, while the largest stake of 39.9% belongs to Sergei Skvortsov, who just a few years ago served as a deputy and advisor to Rostec’s director. As is well known, Russian tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launch systems (MRLS), engines, ammunition, fire arms and electronic warfare systems are manufactured at Rostec plants. Hence, a system designed to manage and automate the collection of tolls to be spent on road construction has been linked directly to the country’s biggest military-industrial entity.

Initially, it was planned that truckers would be charged 3.73 roubles for each kilometer of the federal road once the system was launched. Non-payment would be subject to fines. At that time, as well as now, an administrative fine for a driver and/or a vehicle owner was 5,000 rubles for the first violation and 10,000 rubles for a repeated one (under Article 30 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation).

However, in the face of drivers’ discontent, the government introduced a discount coefficient, and until March 2016, the tariff was reduced to 1.53 roubles per kilometer. This price, too, proved prohibitive for independent truckers. Amid the coronavirus crisis, the Association of International Trucking Hauliers petitioned the authorities to suspend Platon; however,

the Ministry of Transport deemed the tolls “a small burden” for both the truckers and the industry as a whole.

## **Protests by truck drivers**

The launch of Platon was followed by protests organized by heavy truck drivers across Russia, beginning as early as 11 November 2015. Truckers demanded that the system be discontinued altogether, which, in their view, would do nothing but “finish off SMEs.”

The protests were largely spontaneous, with different tactics of resistance used in different regions. For instance, on the M4 “Don” federal highway, drivers blocked the road’s right lane completely. Traffic police officers tried to disperse the participants of this unauthorized protest, but there were too many vehicles. On the M51 Novosibirsk-Omsk highway near Tolmachevo airport, some 300 trucks lined up on the side of the road. In Chelyabinsk, around 100 truckers walked back and forth across a pedestrian crossing for an entire hour, blocking the way for cars. Meanwhile, heavy truck drivers in Perm deliberately drove at a snail’s pace, causing a massive traffic jam. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it gives a clear idea of the protest’s nature.

Some long-haul truckers from Dagestan (formerly one of the most active protest regions) decided to march to Moscow and launch a permanent strike. This information surfaced on November 27, and by December 3, some 20 vehicles arrived at a truck parking lot in the town of Khimki, near Moscow. St. Petersburg truckers attempted a similar strike on the M-10 highway near Zelenogorsk but failed to gain a foothold there. Upon learning of the camp of the Khimki Forest defenders, some drivers drove off to Moscow. This is where one of the most notorious stationary protest camps emerged and lasted for several months.

The next milestone in the truckers’ protest against the Platon system came about in late March 2017, shortly before Platon tariffs were raised even higher. Truckers set up camp right on the Moskovskoye Highway in St Petersburg. There were also trucker strikes in Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia. Hundreds of trucks were camped near Yekaterinburg, Volgograd, Krasnoyarsk, Petrozavodsk, Ussuriisk, Ulan-Ude, and the Saratov and Murmansk regions. In total, more than 50 regions took part in the protests.

The truckers failed to have Platon done away with, yet the government had to make some compromises. The tariffs were reduced by half – from 3.73 roubles to 1.53 roubles per kilometer.

As of today, Platon has been operating in Russia for eight years. Its tariff rate has been indexed and increased multiple times. On February 1, 2023, the rate was again adjusted by 30 kopecks. As a result, the rate per kilometer on a federal highway has increased from 2.54 to 2.84 roubles.

### **“We didn’t stand our ground; we adapted”**

Here are two views of truck drivers, Andrei and Alexey. Andrei Bazhutin, one of the leaders of the truckers’ protests of 2015 and 2017 says: “The aim of the Russian transport business, or rather of its managers — that is, the Ministry of Transport and other state agencies — was to copy and try out the ideas from Europe. Anything that was introduced there had to be brought in here as well. The ‘Platon’ system is the same as the Toll Collect system. But the European market is totally different from ours, even though they are close and overlap... Europe is small; it has numerous countries, each trying to protect its market, transport operators and roads; hence they started to introduce tolling. In Russia, however, this system did not make any sense.”

According to Andrei, there were very few cross-border operators in Russia to begin with, which placed the whole burden on the local market. The local market, however, received no support but instead was decimated. The emergence of the Platon system aggravated the existing precarious situation, where the cost price of transport had long ceased to include profit and margin, leaving nothing but the overheads.

Alexey, a trucker says “At first, I worked as a hired intercity trucker or locally, then I got fed up with it all and decided to start working for myself”. “Those in this business tried to talk me out of it for a long time. They said the good times were over. But I didn’t listen to them, so I bought an old Kamaz trailer and started trucking. The first two or three years of being self-employed were my best. At the time, I felt I was right, and people were talking rubbish. But then, yes, every year, things were going downhill. Spare parts and fuel kept rising while the haulage prices didn’t rise. The bottom line is that there’s less and less money left for you.”

Alexey says he has not been personally affected by Platon. Like many other independent truckers, he found a way around it and didn't even register in the system: "I guess everyone who stayed in the market has found a way to bypass this tax. There are many ways: there are GPS blockers that make it impossible to charge your vehicle when you drive under the ramp, and there are flip-up license plates that stop the cameras from reading your license plates. There are all sorts of ways."

Nonetheless, Alexey was an active protester. The fear was not about the burden this innovation would place on the drivers; it was the enormity of the injustice: "Are we going to let them do this to us again! But eventually, we didn't win anything. Then again, we couldn't really beat the system with so few participants."

The truckers are of the common opinion that only large companies can afford to pay this tax painlessly, those operating in a completely different framework, for instance, if they put this tax into the cost of transportation.

"Judge for yourself," says Alexey, "I usually commute between Ryazan and Moscow and the region. Depending on where I go, I would be paying anything between 1000 and 1500 per haul — with the 20,000 rubles I earn for the whole trip. Some might say: that's nothing! Yes, I can't say it would immediately ruin me and my business. It would just make things harder for me. I need spare parts and petrol; I have to pay business and transport tax of 35 thousand..." Platon would simply be another burden, making my already complicated business even more difficult." He sums it up: "I have not paid, I do not pay, and I won't pay it! Besides, I don't believe this money is used for anything good or useful. At this level of corruption? I haven't noticed the roads improving over the years either!"

In 2015, the active stage of the protests resulted in a small initiative group of truckers meeting with the then Minister of Transport, Maxim Sokolov (now Vitaly Saveliev occupies the post). Sokolov declared at the time that abolishing Platon was out of the question, but in return, he promised there would be data on where the funds collected through the system are allocated. Yet, no report has ever been published in all the eight years that have elapsed.

Andrei Bazhutin says that even before the arrival of the Platon system, the haulage business was already dominated by large companies, now

the smaller businesses are being forced out, by increased operating costs: “Platon simply buried it. At the time of the protests, I traveled extensively around the country, talking to truckers and people taking an active civil stance... What is my point? Practically none of these people are in the market anymore!

Bazhutin himself has been in the haulage business since 1991. At first, he used to hire vehicles; then, he officially opened his own business in 2004. At the best of times, his fleet totaled seven vehicles. “The truth is that each year, I began to notice that the turnover seemed to increase, but the profits were growing smaller and smaller. Naturally, I was against the introduction of the Platon system.”

Being actively involved in the protest movement made him put his two remaining vehicles up for sale in 2016.

“This happened mainly for political reasons. I was constantly pulled over while driving a car; they kept saying my license plates were reportedly stolen. The traffic cops would just pull me over, spend a long time talking to me, asking me questions, and making phone calls to someone, and there were repeated arrests on top of that. So I realized that driving a large truck would be impossible if I had such trouble driving a passenger car. I kind of accepted right away that my business was dead. I did not leave the market, though — I still had to make a living. I simply went to work as a hired driver for some friends of mine. That is how I worked until 2021 before I left the country. Now, in Canada, I make my living repairing American trucks.

### **“Everyone is toiling away, but there are no profits”**

The ATI.SU freight exchange conducted a survey in December 2022: “More than half of the truck drivers (56%) admitted that they were barely surviving, and only one-fifth (21%) believed that the situation had improved over the second half of the year. However, there are some optimists: 14% of respondents had a stable performance throughout the year, and 7% could reap some benefits from the crisis by expanding their business and increasing revenues.”

“The economy has really sagged. I mostly transport construction materials to private sites, but after the 24th, construction works somewhat



stopped, so there has been little to deliver. The prices of spare parts spiked enormously. Then it pulled back a bit, but the price is still pretty high, and the fuel has increased significantly. Obviously, there are now fewer bookings and less cargo,” says Alexey.

Since March 19, new guidelines for the average cost of spare parts, materials and labor hours came into effect, used to calculate CMTPL (compulsory third party liability) insurance claim payments.

According to Evgeny Ufimtsev, President of the Russian Union of Motor Insurers, the average cost of spare parts rose by 19.5% against March of last year: “Despite some stabilization concerning available spare parts in repair shops, we still cannot go back to last year’s prices,” he added. Most affected are the owners of cars of those brands that have either withdrawn from the market altogether or “suspended” their operations temporarily. In this case, the price increase can be as high as 45%. Doors are considered the most expensive parts. Bonnets, bumpers, optics and windscreens are up by 60%.

“The freight market is taking a severe blow due to many economic and, most importantly, political developments. Just like the banking industry. The only difference is that bankers have a lot of money, while freight operators don’t,” says Andrei Bazhutin. “Whatever they may be telling us about railways, everything that’s imported into this country is imported by trucks. At some point, Putin’s pal Rotenberg attempted to shift freight traffic to Russian Railways, but he failed. The railway is not advanced in Russia. There’s the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which isn’t very fast, and the unfinished BAM railroad. Basically, that’s it.”

The withdrawal of key players from the truck market — such as Scania and Volvo — has been one of the most painful effects the war has had on the haulage industry. “Those vehicles used to be manufactured in Russia — not anymore. Right now, Sitrak is attempting to take over the market... Let’s put it this way: it’s the Chinese version of the German Man. So people buy even these vehicles, trying to hustle out even in these dire economic straits. Many people reassure themselves: yes, the prices are up, but they seem to have stabilized somewhat. But it only looks this way. I know folks with both small and large fleets... They all have one thing in common: they all toil away, but there are no profits, only overheads,” concludes Bazhutin.

Another essential feature of the Russian freight trucking market is that it used to live off big government projects: the Sochi Olympics, the Western High-Speed Diameter toll motorway, bridges, roads, and oil rigs. “We all took stuff there and made good profits. Sanctions have destroyed the national-projects market, too; they are gone; besides, now everything is geared towards the war. And yes, some people take an active part now; they take construction supplies to Donbas. I understand people need to support themselves, but I can’t support this!”

Mr. Bazhutin also says that all the truckers agree that the volume of freight has shrunk drastically: “I’m not saying that there is no freight at all, just that there is very little of it. And the freight rates are not just going up; they dropped down.”

Let’s take the following example to get an idea of how little work there is now.

“I move construction materials and mostly pick up cargo at the iron and concrete plants in Ryazan, where a few of them exist.” — says Alexey. “In good times, during the peak season, I would spend lots of time queuing. For each loading area, there used to be lots of vehicles. Now, in spring and summer, the peak season, I gather that there are only half as many trucks. As for the winter or autumn, now it’s about a third of what it used to be. Now you come to the plant, and there’s no one around! At such moments, you’re just happy you were lucky enough to find a job at all — others, apparently, were not so fortunate if there are only two or three trucks next to you.”

There used to be many imports. Machine tools, equipment, agricultural machines — Russia produces none of those things itself. Consequently, it was small and medium businesses that were hit the hardest. The independent trucker is no longer there; instead, there is a monopolist in the form of a major player. No, I am not saying that no small businesses are left. There are just very few of them, and they barely survive. But people still need a livelihood; people still need to work! You see, many of them put their whole lives into it. They always did the job well. And they do not know how to do anything else!”

## **“I wake up, and my first thought is: there’s a war going on”**

“Perhaps the biggest disappointment is that some of those people who fought with us against the Platon system and the general injustice volunteered to go to the front and fight on Russia’s side. Others merely support this war and tell me that they in Rostov-on-Don have a better sense of what’s going on there than I do in Canada,” says Andrei. “A distant relation of mine volunteered for this war. And, paradoxical as it may sound to the pseudo-patriots, he was disillusioned by what he saw. I’ve always accepted people of other views as friends, too. Well, it’s foolish to shut yourself off and only be around people who think the same way. Otherwise, one will start acting like Putin sooner or later. So, unfortunately, I feel like most people (in Russia?) support this war without fully realizing what it is they are condoning!”

“A week into the war, I made a sign on the board: I wrote ‘no to war’ and drew two peace signs. I drove around like that for quite a while, for about two months. Then I got stopped on the road and was fined 30 thousand rubles for discrediting the Russian army,” Alexey sums up. “The motherland is, on the one hand, the place where you were born. On the other hand, it is where you feel you belong. But I do not feel like I belong here anymore. And I no longer have a motherland either. I would gladly leave this country, but my family situation makes it impossible. I cannot change things; I can only express my position and opinions. I still wake up every morning, and my first thought is: there is a war going on. A horrible, pointless war made up of nothing but war crimes. Platon seems irrelevant.”

However, in March 2022, there was an appeal to the authorities to set a two-year moratorium on tariff adjustments. A draft law on suspending Platon and eliminating highway tolls, submitted to the Duma at the same time, was debated in May and gained no support. All in all, one cannot say that the war Russia unleashed in Ukraine seven years after Platon was introduced has crushed the haulage industry. Businesses still need to move all sorts of freight, though the situation for truckers whose work is unrelated to the needs of the “Special Military Operation” has gotten worse than ever. Big-truck drivers struggle to survive, while businessmen like Igor Rotenberg and the rest of those who rip the benefits off the Russian regime shine in another Forbes list, while the state-owned Rostec corporation boasts about their growing output of missiles and tanks. Many stay strong and continue the business in which they have invested their life. The real question is if this business can still put food on the table today.



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## THE MAJORITY DOES NOT EXIST

LGBTQ+ movement in Russia,  
hierarchical communities  
and the ethics of modern activism

In the last year, Irida, a small LGBTQ+ defense group based in Samara, was declared a “foreign agent.” Seemingly, they were identified before even their respected colleagues heard of them. The following week, an LGBT-Sports Society was also listed, despite having no involvement in political activities. In both cases, it appears that the Ministry of Justice was motivated by formal grounds, specifically, organized activities related to the LGBT+ theme.

The “foreign agent” label is a state tactic that aims to suppress and hinder the activities of organized groups and individuals within Russia, through strenuous requirements such as registering a legal entity, financial transparency and auditing, and mandatory labeling in public communications. Clearly, the internal bodies of the Russian Federation consider any organized initiative, any leadership or what they believe as such, a threat; making it currently unsafe for individuals to organize and work together in communities towards a common goal. This has led many to bitterly conclude that “all previous achievements are rendered meaningless in the face of destruction” and “this is the end of the LGBTQ+ movement.”

In reality, the inability to act refers primarily to public organizations and initiatives, while activist communities still survive in a semi-private mode. Even if the state is able to liquidate all public organizations, the LGBTQ+ movement cannot be reduced to them alone. Any form of organized activity can only emerge when there are objective conditions that allow for it. Even the “kitchen conversations” of Soviet dissidents (which were derided during the era of glasnost) and the meetings in so-called “safe houses” became possible because there was less police surveillance.

Over the past ten years, it has become commonplace to have a variety of organized activities. In turn, giving them up was disappointing. Doing so meant giving up useful resources. This discourse previously inspired the possibility that we unite by “any and all means” in the face of common misfortune and encourage “the right kind of activism.” This way of thinking remains prevalent today. However, this sentiment is not shared internally amongst activist groups. The discussion and normalization of these topics today enable us to pose the following question: could the absence of unity become politically productive and in what way? Answering this question implies redefining the term “activism” itself.

Those who sympathize with the regime perceive the people in the LGBTQ+ as a group with shared values. In this same way, the LGBTQ+ community is depicted in propaganda media, and internalized by the activists themselves. However, the idea of a united community, if ever relevant, has become outdated regardless of state persecution. Even the most inspiring slogans appealing to unity, in reality, face the complex problem of intra-activist hierarchy and unequal access to resources. Voicing these issues directly and learning to discuss them could help us find a solution.

## **United we stand, divided we fall?**

Today, community, at least in relation to LGBTQ+, refers to an association based on a common ground of stigma: MOGII+ – marginalized orientations, gender identities and intersex. This is a theoretical group that does not exist in real life. MOGII+ is made up of a multitude of individuals who are not necessarily vulnerable, as well as communities that are far from being free from prejudice against each other. To the outside view, the difference between LGBTQ+ may not be obvious, but in the meaning, it encapsulates a spectrum of identities. Homosexual people may be biphobic, bisexual people may be transphobic, transgender men or women may not believe that genderfluidity or agenderism exists, and agender people may feel comfortable with heteronormativity.

In addition to sexual and gender identity, there are many other social identities and individual differences: in political views, domestic habits, musical tastes, family structures, and more. Even when people want to be among those who share their identities, it doesn't necessarily mean that they will agree on everything. Disagreements can arise even within relatively homogeneous groups based on any of these differences. While the LGBTQ+ community is no stranger to being outcasted from society, long-time activists are often prejudiced against people both internally and externally. For example, in polemic debates, one may encounter a belief that there are "right" and "wrong" representatives and spokespeople of movements.

Moreover, it seems that those who criticize perceived social norms feel the pressure of their own claim to morality. There exist social norms and expectations, which are not always expressed directly,

that demand activists and women activists lead by example, especially in matters concerning solidarity. The pressure to meet these unrealistic expectations within their community prevents self-criticism. Even if criticism is expressed, it often triggers emotional resistance and denial, creating a vicious cycle. When differences in opinions arise, activists tend to dismiss each other as either “insiders” or “outsiders” in their conversations. Such dismissal ultimately leads to the dominance of “mainstream” opinions and the marginalization of all others wherever it happens, and this process is, again, driven by the worn-out idea of “unity”.

For instance, in situations where an LGBT+ initiative collaborates with other initiatives, it may face requests to “temporarily shelve” its agenda as a “lower priority.” Nonetheless, the absence of LGBTQ+ representation at the agenda level can create the perception that the community is not contributing to the overarching cause, potentially diminishing its significance and weakening its influence.

This problem is apparent on a large scale: all civil rights are of equal importance and cannot be ranked. However, navigating this issue within local associations can be much more complicated. For instance, a city may only have one LGBTQ+ community, leaving individuals with a difficult decision to make. They must either compromise their interests for the sake of the common cause or withdraw from participation altogether. This often results in only the most comfortable individuals remaining in the local group. When many voices are not heard, it can appear as if there are no other LGBTQ+ individuals in the region, or even the country in some cases.

Sometimes, being an activist is the privilege of having access to a microphone. At the same time, it is almost impossible to become an activist without already having such access and important connections. This is how the activist community turns into a network, in which everyone knows everyone else and canvasses only among themselves, blacklisting all those who disagree.

This issue has been around for a while and outlives the current discussions surrounding it. For example, third-wave feminists strongly criticized the idea of universal sisterhood and drew attention to the fact that media feminist media only belonged to privileged, white women. The Soviet dissident movement is often synonymous with the human



rights movement, but in reality, the movement was much more diverse than commonly acknowledged, with a multitude of dissenting voices. As revealed in testimonies from the dissidents themselves, there were internal divisions, with some being reluctant to identify as dissidents due to the label's association with being an "intellectual from the capital." Similarly, in 2016, Queerfest's theme of "Seeing the Invisible" drew attention to the hierarchical structures present within the LGBTQ+ community, such as divisions based on geography, ethnicity, age, and other factors.

Intra-activist hierarchy and unequal access to resources are common problems in the formation of civic initiatives, and the reality within Russian society is no exception. Both individual activists and communities are working on this problem. Nevertheless, the issue remains relevant, especially in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.

## **We are the power here**

Social and political crises succeed in two areas: involving new people in civic activism and highlighting general disunity. Thus, in 2020, in a groundbreaking global pandemic, the idea of freedom of assembly came into conflict with the idea of the need for restrictions for public safety. People who had previously been in solidarity found themselves in uncharted waters. This also happens as a result of gradual change. Once, the tradition for 17 May (International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia) was to launch colorful balloons into the sky. Over time, as the stance of eco-activists became prominently represented, the action ceased to be appropriate for the whole community.

New individuals in activism are faced with both old and new problems. Whether peaceful actions work, or do we need to use direct action tactics? Is the Russian F-word a homophobic slur, or has it lost its original meaning? Can the objectification (including self-objectification) of women be used strategically? Each new person in activism answers these questions in their own way and may revise the opinion over time.

Subjectively, it is important for everyone to be part of a community that is perceived as a safe space or as a chosen family. Sometimes, internal disagreements feel like the destruction of one's own home. "Criticizing one's own group", especially if it becomes known outside the

conflict parties, not only makes vulnerabilities visible for those against the community but is also tactless to those closest to us and threatens relationships that we are interested in preserving. To initiate this process of open criticism, one needs to feel sufficiently separated from the community so that it is not perceived as a personal attack. It is crucial to have the sense that the current and future relationships will not be affected by criticism, and there should be no dependence on these ties, be it psychological or otherwise. Alternatively, one should have enough resources to overcome any negative consequences resulting from the criticism.

One can recall a couple of situations that happened within the team of the LGBTQ+ organization “Coming Out”. An accusation of harassment in 2019 and an accusation of abusive behavior in 2022. Both times, the discussion was initiated by people who were no longer part of the team. Some activists are open about problems of inter-activist hierarchy, transparency, ethics, etc. However, it seems that most cases of traumatic interaction never make it into the public space, even when impersonal.

Discussing internal differences is always a question of the distribution of power and privilege. In any group, there is group pressure, internal authority, and also, unfortunately, the realm of the “unnamed.”. The topics of which are discouraged from general discussions and debates. It is hardly possible to outline the actual taboos, but the public and unspoken rules somehow formalize the borders of this area in every single community. And every single conflict is resolved according to whoever has most influence.

The appropriation of power is not always intentional. Unequal status and unequal distribution of resources are not absolute and abstract faults that are detached from reality. However, in the model of hierarchical thinking, the opposing view is repeatedly suspected of an intention to appropriate power. The implication is that behind this particular criticism, there are ulterior motives of the opposition, which supposedly refuses to acknowledge the envy or desire for power. Particularly, the dissatisfaction with its own position in the hierarchy and a desire to climb to a higher level. This conspiracy model implies that these ranks exist objectively and are valued in the same way.

## Whether you like it or not, the empire will rot

After the Russian-Ukrainian war entered an active phase, the disunity became more pronounced: with the discussions of those who left versus those who stayed, peaceful protest versus direct action, and collective responsibility. Prevalent accusations that the opposition has no leader or that the LGBTQ+ movement is more preoccupied with arguments within the community than with the united struggle. However, it is not possible to streamline activism in the same way that it is not possible to exasperate social issues.

The word “activism” itself is too vague; not necessarily expressing anything concrete. The actions of activists can be non-public (moderation of public space, digitization of letters of political prisoners, verification of lists of military deaths) or, in some cases, completely anonymous and partisan, such as directly excluding publicity. In this context, the question of whether a sound exists if no one hears it takes on political significance, as partisan activists may feel entitled to retreat from community discussions without consequence, effectively silencing their activist voice.

We can assume that even invisible activism involves an “act,” but calling people “activists” on the basis of regular action alone would also be misleading. Did I stop being an activist when I temporarily lay low after Russian officials searched my home? If with a decrease in income, the ability to donate has disappeared, can we say that “he was an activist but stopped supporting the cause because of the financial crisis”? If a person holds occasional events in her initiative group, is she a permanent activist or only “for particular occasions”? Activism is not job tenure.

Furthermore, activism is not always a deliberate “act.” In 2016, during the May Day march in Vladivostok, a group of young people was detained for displaying rainbow symbols. The media portrayed this as an LGBTQ+ public event, a manifestation of pride. In fact, it was my friends and I who were detained that day. And I can assure you that we had no intention to manifest whatsoever. We simply went out for a walk. It was only the perception of bystanders who saw our walk as a political action.

The question of distinguishing between an activist act and a regular act poses a challenge. Is discussing a certain topic with friends or choosing a graduation thesis related to one’s identity an act of activism or merely

personal interest? The idea that the personal is political blurs the lines further. Perhaps there is no such thing as non-activist activity, only varying degrees of involvement. It is impossible to predict when and why an action will be labelled as activism.

All of these inquiries lead to the realization that activism is not solely an activity, but an intentional and active participation in a broader network. It involves being conscious of one's surroundings and being willing to contribute and to make an effort when the opportunity and a supportive community are present. Even in the absence of favorable conditions, individuals may be considered "sleeper agents" waiting for their chance to participate in a shared cause, rather than completely dissociating themselves from it.

In this sense, the Russian LGBTQ+ movement cannot be deemed ended by particularly repressive legislation. While the context has changed, there are still individuals who persist in their activism and seek out new opportunities. However, it is unrealistic to expect all individuals, whether "sleepers" or "revealed" agents, to possess the same motivation and goals. This applies not only to the LGBTQ+ movement but to many civic initiatives. Identity formation is an individual process, and the LGBTQ+ movement has always been a collection of spontaneous individual voices, rather than a cohesive entity.

Although hierarchical systems may be perceived as a stronger threat in the model of hierarchical thinking, negative reactions are more often elicited by well-organized activities. Nevertheless, the ideological victory over the empire should not involve building a new, replacement empire. Rather than a hierarchical organization, an alternative "LGBTQ+ Russia" can be built upon a community-based model.

The Soviet dissident movement, including that of dissident women, serves as an example of effective resistance against state decree. However, they did not overthrow the regime, nor did they possess a unified leader. Furthermore, the vast majority of the population was unaware of their activities due to media censorship. Nor did they become a significant political force. Yet, their main contribution was in developing a model for a future civil society, opposing the totalitarian system, with all its contradictions.

## Resistance is the only solution

Some may think that dissent within a community often plays into the hands of the regime. In fact, the opposite is true: civil society is impossible without an open discussion and the representation of as many opinions as possible.

People tend to build hierarchical relationships because they are raised in them. It is logical to strive to create a comfortable environment for oneself in which everyone behaves accordingly. This is possible by creating a safe space, that is, an exclusive, organized space in which only people whose behavior conforms to the established rules — and if they don't, they can be ostracized. However, in an inclusive community in which people are not arbitrarily included, there will inevitably be a clash of interests. It is not possible to expel anyone from the collective space and it is not possible to welcome anyone into it either.

In such communities, one should learn to negotiate rather than censor themselves for the sake of the idea of unity. The social contract can be reduced to a single aspect that nobody tries to deliberately offend other people. The obligation imposed by this social contract is not to force oneself to participate in toxic communication but (according to the same rule) to try to not cause offence in return.

In every particular project, there needs to be a distribution of roles, which means there is a hierarchy. But it should not exist outside of the project, including within each specific group. One can share an unpopular opinion. You can criticize 'your own'. The restriction may not be on the opinion, but only on the ways and situations of expressing it, and even this ban may not be unconditional.

This is not a horizontal approach (horizontality is also the definition for specific governance relations), but neither is its atomization. On the contrary, what leads to atomization is a situation in which differences (ideological or personal) become an excuse for separation.

So what exactly can be done with this approach today? We can formulate three lines of action:

1. Represent ourselves and our interests. Each and every one of us is an independent outlet with its own audience. It is okay if your representation does not coincide with that of others, even if you agree with what your identity is called. The main thing is to try not to generalize and not to speak for everyone at once. Especially be careful to speak for those who you are not.

2. Focus on your personal capacities (what you can do contribute) and team up with those who do the same.

3. Spread the word, but do not make it your mission to reconvince others. Share experiences and instructions (not “what” but “how”) to find those with whom to unite.

It is also important to share media platforms. For example, the Far Eastern social movement Mayak in Vladivostok can provide space for your project, even if it is not shared by 100% of the team. I can publish your opinion on my blog, even if I don't agree with you.

The problem of unequal distribution of resources cannot be solved quickly, but you need to start by changing your own attitude to disagreement. This can help to overcome self-censorship by not reducing communication only to the measurement of “better or worse” and the pressure of personal authority.

Stigmatized groups, by virtue of their position, are sensitive to the language of hostility. War dulls this sensitivity by making hate speech legitimate. The LGBTQ+ community already has a superpower that will be useful for those outside the community. This power lies in the ability to recognize hate speech and channeling disagreements in a constructive way.

A lack of unity is a good signal. It means that there is freedom of opinion in the community and the opportunity to express it. The more legs a civil society has, the stronger it stands — and the more it can kick.

These series of publications  
was prepared with the support  
of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation

