



Volunteers removing fuel oil from the beach in Krasnodar Region after two oil tankers crashed in the Kerch Strait on 15 December 2024
/ Photo: Krasnodar Region's emergency response center

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OPINION

The Micropolitics of Resistance

JEREMY MORRIS DRAWS ON THE LESSONS FROM HIS UPCOMING BOOK TO EXPLAIN HOW SMALL CIVIC ACTS IN RUSSIA CAN WORK AS FUNCTIONAL RESISTANCE.

What should ordinary people do with their feelings of despair and helplessness in the face of naked power grabs by cynical figures? This is the question many civic-minded Russians face. The election of Trump might seem very distant from the realities of Russian society at war, but many Americans now find themselves asking the same questions, caught in a similar emotional landscape.

It's easy for Americans to react further in two unhelpful ways: either the system will be robust enough to stop the descent into oligarchic dictatorship, or that the actions of individuals don't matter, or can't change things, so it makes no sense to stick one's head above the parapet. Often this leads to the worst kind of 'inner

emigration' where people detach themselves from any and all forms of social solidarity or civic work, retreating into the husk of the individual.

Recently a formerly civically-active person from a large Russian city told me that, "since 2022 I have benefitted from trimming my exposure to people. To stabilize myself, I've learned by heart something I say over and over to myself: that it's pointless to speak of politics and current events."

But not everyone has the luxury of turning to personal problems as a way of avoiding the social. The human desire to connect to others and work on a common task is hard to fully suppress, as I argue in [my forthcoming book "Everyday Politics in Russia"](#).

Many researchers focus on questions of 'legacy', on how Russians' perception of what is politically possible is shaped by their past experiences. Indeed, there is a broad disillusionment with electoral politics, and increasing numbers of Russians when polled, express preference for a social and political system [resembling the Soviet one](#).

In my book I talk to people from all walks of life about this disillusionment — indirectly. I talk to older people about what is missing from their lives now, about their ideals for the lives of their grandchildren. I talk to workers and thinkers about what kind of 'good' society can be imagined.

Even in the darkest of times the stories mainly resemble each other. Having a role which is meaningful in improving one's social and physical environment, enriching the lives of those around us, and having a political referent that sees the possible future as better than the present — these are all unremarkably remarkable things. Moreover, while I talk to self-avowed 'activists', and 'politically-minded' people, they are the exception to the rule of the ethnographer, who aims to focus on the socially-typical individuals.

However, much of the time in media and scholarly commentary on Russia, the inheritance of the period before 1991 and in the

interregnum of the 1990s, **is cast as purely negative**. This legacy allegedly forced people into double-think, subjected them to engagement in meaningless ritual political talk turning them into cynical individualists. Alternatively, on the economic level it forced them to engage in corrupt or illegal forms of survival strategies, often at the expense of the weakest in society.



Flea market in Rostov-on-Don, 1992 / Photo: Brian Kelley, CC BY-SA 2.0

Perhaps some of the most dominant ideas about the social legacies operative in Russia propose a powerful framework about what 70 years of communist rule did to the Russians: **they maladapted to survive**, but in doing so remained **civilizationally-incompetent** when presented with the choice between autocracy and democracy, the liberal market economy and insider rentier capitalism. The problem with the argument is obvious, **but rarely acknowledged**. The maladaptation idea allows all structural and complex failings in a society to be downplayed in favour of channelling guilt towards 'the masses'. It also tends towards simplistic technocratic solutions, and is profoundly anti-democratic in nature. To be fair, this anti-populist thinking is operative in most

societies faced with extreme problems and rapid change. And that's the point of rejecting the 'maladaptive' essentialization of national groups. Histories of countries may be more or less 'lucky', more or less affected by human and physical geography. But there's little particularly unique to the political quandary of Russia, nor in the responses of mostly powerless people that would warrant the degree of exceptionalism ascribed.

If the possibility of imagining the 'good' as a socially-connective imperative is a powerful legacy even now, then what effects does this have beyond just an unrequited desire for change? By treating seemingly 'apolitical' and 'activists' as equally capable, I try to give 'noisy' and 'quiet' or even insidious politics equal prominence.

There are tireless yard-improvers from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Often conducted locally by older women, why shouldn't **beautification practices** such as urban gardening be viewed through the same political lens as the ambitions of opposition activists? Often the results are more successful: material improvement of one's locality, the installation of children's play equipment, the siting of proper waste removal facilities, and so on. While this is perhaps the most banal example of political virtue, it serves as a strong reminder that by taking constellations of micropolitical life seriously, we can anticipate changes at the macro level that otherwise defy explanation to those observers satisfied only with the actions of elites.

My book reiterates one of the main insights of political anthropology — that the separation of the political from the social is itself an ideological construct of mainstream social science. Nonetheless, as an ethnographer I also track down and follow many political activists who even today devote themselves to both anti-war activism and ecological projects. Indeed, the term '**horizontalism**' is more important than ever before. Shared experiences of the growing repression and **shrinking opportunities for openly public opposition** in the last years only intensify emotionally the experiential entanglement of activism.



Painted over anti-war graffiti in Moscow, 2022 / Photo: Ivan Kleymenov

While there are only a few who risk anti-war **graffiti** or even **sabotage** (and for ethical reasons researchers should not engage with the latter), there are many who actively seek out niches to expand into — from therapeutic communities embracing holistic ecological and ethical ways of living in harmony with nature, to labour organizers who prefigure a future when associational protection of workers may again become possible. Through force of imagination for that future they agitate even now to protect dignity in work, and fight for better wages. Young people, through collective practices of art, and even of leisure, continue prefiguring the better world they deserve: coming together to sew, paint, or just tinker with things. For some young people the most important ‘patriotism’ today is working together to care for one’s local environment, for example by taking collective hikes along river valleys to pick up litter. These are all examples from my book. Even people who maintain ambiguous loyalty to the state, are able to do meaningful civic work that is not recuperated by the regime.

At the end of the book I visit a housewife in a small town in Russia. At Eastertime in 2024 she gives out to neighbours some home-baked cakes decorated with icing. The icing spells out the

abbreviation 'XB', which can be interpreted as an acronym for either 'Christ is Risen', or 'Fuck the War'. Why did she do this? Because she needed to acknowledge others and be acknowledged as a political subject in her own right.

Just look at the response to the environmental disaster in the Kerch strait. Knowing the inadequacy and corruption of the state, ordinary people came out en-masse to clean up beaches and rescue wildlife. They did this without the prompting of charismatic leaders, without a robust NGO network, and without a free media or 'public sphere'.

It turns out that the common assumption to dismiss small acts, incremental thinking, and prefigurative desires is self-fulfilling. If we don't believe in even small politics and changes, then there will be no change. To return to the problem of powerlessness, Americans who feel despair at the prospect of Trump-Musk dismantling the Department of Education, or enabling the targeting of undocumented migrants or transgender youth can learn much from the civic flame that burns despite darkness.



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