The Russia Program

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

Academic Policy Paper Series, no. 5, December 2024

"We Need to Carry On": Ethnography of Russian Regions During Wartime

Public Sociology Laboratory

Edited by Svetlana Erpyleva and Sasha Kappinen

Written by: Maxim Alyukov, Aida Belousova, Svetlana Erpyleva, Sasha Kappinen, Marina Kokshajskaja, Mikhail Krulev, Yakov Lurie, Natalia Savelyeva, Vlad Siyutkin, Oleg Zhuravlev

The war in Ukraine has been ongoing for nearly three years, and according to research, it has become a routine part of life, largely ignored in public discourse and cultural expression. Ethnographic studies in Buryatia, Krasnodar Krai, and Sverdlovsk Oblast reveal that pro-war efforts are driven more by pressure and personal connections than ideology. While divisions between war opponents and non-opponents are fading, a deeper rift has emerged between those who stayed in Russia and those who emigrated. Despite a stronger national identity, it diverges from the Kremlin's narrative, with many apolitical Russians criticizing the war for eroding societal values like family integrity and the value of life.

The Russia Program's Academic Policy Paper Series is a collection of policy reports produced by scholars using rigorous academic methodologies. The series aims to present cutting-edge, policy-relevant research in a form that is both accessible and impactful for a broad audience.

The Russia Program at GW is a George Washington University-based analytical center which innovates in digital methods for Russian studies, facilitates research and data-driven decision making and unites Russia experts from all over the world.

© 2024-"We need to carry on": Ethnography of Russian regions during wartime, by Maxim Alyukov, Aida Belousova, Svetlana Erpyleva, Sasha Kappinen, Marina Kokshajskaja, Mikhail Krulev, Yakov Lurie, Natalia Savelyeva, Vlad Siyutkin, Oleg Zhuravlev at The Russia Program. This article is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES)
1957 E St., NW, Suite 412,
Washington, DC 20052

This page intentionally left blank.

Summary

Ethnographic research conducted this fall in three regions of Russia—Buryatia, Krasnodar Krai and the Sverdlovsk Oblast—revealed the following trends:

1. ***Russian society remains politically demobilized and deideologized***. Despite the prevailing opinion that it is strictly militarized, we see that the war has become a routine, and therefore disregarded part of reality. For example, compared to the first years of the war, ***the amount of pro-war symbolism in public spaces has decreased*** in all three regions. The war has not become a source of new ideas in the cultural life of the cities or villages, integrating into familiar and already established cultural formats. ***The war is not discussed in public places***, nor, with the rare exception, in local online communities.
2. Participation in various types of pro-war volunteering and organized assistance for the military, which are often cited as an example of the mobilization and militarization of Russian society, ***is usually associated with pressure from the administration, community moral norms (concerning mutual assistance), or a desire to help loved ones***, rather than a desire to bring Russia closer to victory.
3. ***Conflict between opponents and non-opponents of the war is gradually subsiding***, while the rift between those who remained in Russia and those who left is growing. This is happening both because the shared experience of living through a difficult situation within the country is becoming more important for many Russians than any differences in viewpoint, and also because people are discussing the war less.
4. At the same time, ***the reduction in conflict between opponents and non-opponents of the war does not always lead to an increase in social cohesion***. Since people are trying to live as if the war didn't exist and the government doesn't talk about any losses or problems associated with the war, all negative consequences of the war are either normalized or pushed into the realm of "personal problems" that are not discussed with anyone and which everyone must deal with on their own.
5. At the same time, many have experienced a strengthened sense of national identity, and sometimes a demand for greater solidarity arises. It's important to note that this increased sense of national identity does not lead Russians to adopt the official imperial brand of nationalism. Unlike the Kremlin, ***ordinary people live in a world of nation states, not in a world of imperial fantasies*** (according to which Ukraine is not a real state and Ukrainians are an inferior people).
6. ***Apolitical Russians who justify the war are becoming more critical and increasingly doubtful of official explanations of the conflict***. Their criticisms differ from the criti-

cisms of war opponents, but also ***have a moral character***. For opponents, the war is a moral crime against Ukraine, while for apolitical Russians, the war destroys the "moral foundations" of Russian society—the integrity of the family or the value of human life.

7. This criticism, however, ***does not lead Russians who justify the war to doubt in its necessity and inevitability, and does not entail criticism of the Russian government***.
8. Regardless of their views on the war, ***many Russians are increasingly distrustful of political news*** from a broad range of sources. Instead, they put their trust in local media sources. The local problems and news that these programs are devoted to seem much more important and relevant to them. ***People don't believe that they can influence anything***, and therefore they don't want to watch news about the war or talk about it.
9. ***A feeling of uncertainty is what truly unites Russians today***. Despite the fact that people choose various strategies to cope with this feeling, it still significantly complicates the ability to plan one's life and plunges Russians into pessimism.

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

This page intentionally left blank.

1

Introduction

For more than two years now, Russia has been waging war on Ukraine. The initial shock in the first days and months of the war, the sudden immersion of millions of politically removed Russians in the daily news agenda, political disputes and conflicts with loved ones, the struggle between anti-war and pro-war symbols on the streets of Russian cities—all this is gradually becoming a thing of the past. War is becoming part of the new order, partly unpleasant, but familiar. Today, many Russians have learned to turn a blind eye to war (who could have imagined something like this at the end of February 2022!). But even though it has gradually become background noise for most Russians, the war is steadily changing Russia.

The more time passes since the beginning of the war, the larger the effect it has on Russian society. One part of society—mobilized, confident supporters of the war, civil servants and pro-war intelligentsia—is directly or indirectly captivated with the front and the horror of death, injuries, broken psyches; with a hope for victory over Ukraine. The other part continues to experience the societal transformations occurring in tandem with the military operations. The new economic policy, Russia's isolation from the West and the growing alienation from those who "left"—all of this constitutes the layers of the new Russian reality. How can the normalization of war and attempts to ignore it on the one hand, and the cognitive dissonance with ever-rising death toll in the immediate vicinity, attacks on Russian territory and sanctions on the other hand, coexist in modern Russia? How do Russians experience the death of a loved one, which is then compensated with a few hundred thousand rubles? How do these processes change Russian perception of the war and affect everyday life, especially outside the capitals, which usually attract media attention? What is everyday life like today in Russia during wartime?

At the start of the war, the most pressing issue concerning experts, politicians and Russians themselves was the specifics of war support: who supports it and why, and what percentage of the total population do these people comprise? Two years later, when many Russian citizens have found themselves directly involved in the hostilities, lost loved ones or come under fire, and society and the economy have adapted to the military reality, experts, analysts and the interested public demand answers to new questions. Namely, they want to understand *how Russians live in the new reality*, an ineradicable part of which is the war. Do they feel the impact of war on their daily lives? Are they adapting to the situation, and how? What makes them happy and what makes them unhappy? Surveys, and even formal interviews with strangers are insufficient

to provide answers to these new questions. This requires special research—systematic participant observation on the situation, *informal* conversations with people about the war—because, as we know, people may discuss sensitive topics in an entirely different way with each other than they would with sociologist strangers. Despite the many risks associated with conducting this type of research in modern Russia, primarily for the researchers themselves, we were able to do so. In the fall of 2023, members of our team went on ethnographic trips to three Russian regions—the Sverdlovsk Oblast, the Republic of Buryatia, and Krasnodar Krai—and spent a month there. The researchers managed to collect ***truly unique data***, on which this report has been founded.

The material you are reading now is the *third* analytical report devoted to Russian perception of the war. The first, *The War Near and Far*, was written based on the results of sociological interviews with Russians holding different attitudes on the war, conducted immediately after the start of the invasion, in the spring of 2022. We compared how opponents, supporters, and undecided citizens experienced the war, how they justified or criticized it, spoke about it with loved ones, consumed information, imagined the future, and so on. In the second report, *Resigning Themselves to Inevitability*, based on interviews taken in fall 2022, we described how the war is perceived by those whom we have called "non-opponents." We analyzed apolitical support for the war among Russians who criticized the new military reality, but still justified it. We presumed that these Russians are in the majority, and that this apolitical support is one of the main components of the new social order. In this third analytical report, we again focus on the perception of the war by Russians with very different attitudes towards the situation. Nonetheless, this report is unique both in comparison with the first two and in comparison with how Russians' perceptions of the war are studied by other teams: it is based on *ethnographic* research, that is, on the systematic immersion of researchers in the everyday life of people during the war in different cities of Russia and on participant observation of this life. Thus, instead of taking interlocutors out of their daily routines and placing them in the artificial context of a sociological interview or survey, we observed conversations about the war in a "natural environment" and how the war affected their everyday lives.

We chose three regions for this study: Krasnodar Krai, which is geographically close to the front; the Sverdlovsk Oblast, which is "average" in many respects (for example, the number of mobilized soldiers and income per capita); and the Republic of Buryatia, one of the leaders in the number of mobilized and contract soldiers. Each one of these regions was compelling in its own way for studying the impact of war on the everyday life of Russians. We believed that the proximity to the front could make the war especially noticeable and frightening for residents of Krasnodar Krai, and that mass conscription of an ethnic minority to the war "for Russia" could cause discontent among residents of Buryatia. The reality, of course, proved much more complex and interesting than our expectations.

We sent one researcher to each of the three regions and each spent about a month in their region, living in one, two, or three different locations. All three trips took place between late August and mid-November 2023. Some researchers already had acquaintances and contacts in the regions while others did not, so the work in each "field" (as the researchers called the situations in which they collect data) differed. But one way or another, all three researchers collected interviews and observed social life and urban space, recording evidence of the effects of the war

in their field journals. They attended public events with patriotic and military themes. They engaged in conversations with drivers, shop assistants, bartenders and manicurists, casually asking them how the so-called "special military operation" was affecting city life. They made new acquaintances, went on walks with them, went out to cafés, invited them over to visit, and spoke with them, observing how the latter talked (or didn't talk) about the war. Immediately afterwards, the researchers recorded the content of the conversation and their observations in ethnographic field journals—anonymously, of course. In this way, we obtained 75 interviews with residents of six settlements from the three regions we studied, as well as 698 pages (330,000 words) of observations of everyday life during the war and conversations about the war in a natural setting.

When choosing interlocutors, we no longer focused on their attitude toward the war, which our researchers often did not know in advance. We spoke with those with whom we were able to establish trusting relationships (directly or through acquaintances) or people with whom strangers often speak without arousing suspicion (for example, taxi drivers). Accordingly, our sample included people with very different experiences and views on the situation. For analytical purposes, we divided all our interlocutors into opponents and non-opponents. Opponents are those who consistently criticize war and never try to justify it. Thus, we conventionally call all the others non-opponents. This group contains both confident war supporters and those who justify war as the lesser of two evils or try to distance themselves from making an assessment altogether.

In addition, in November 2023, we collaborated with the Chronicle project and ExtremeScan to conduct eight focus groups in four Russian cities (Samara, Rostov, Irkutsk and Izhevsk) dedicated to Russian perception of the war and how they view the consequences of the war for Russian society. We refer to these focus groups as additional material in one of the chapters of the report.

Apart from this short introduction, our analytical report consists of a methodological chapter and two substantive sections. Despite the boring word "methodology," the methodological chapter is quite fascinating and we strongly recommend not skipping it. You will learn not only which cities/villages we collected data from, but also how our researchers managed to speak with Russians about the war for a month, despite the risks and military censorship in the country.

The first substantive part of the report is devoted to the impact of the war on the daily lives of residents of each of the three regions. If you want to experience maximum immersion in Russian everyday life during the war, then this is the section for you. For each of our fields, we describe the specifics of the regions and particular cities and villages in which the research was conducted; the reflection of the war in the public space of these cities; the impact of the war on the lives of ordinary city and village residents and their (non)adaptation to the situation; and in some cases, the way people unify to help people on the frontlines. In the second part of the report, we focus on Russian perception of the war as a whole, documenting the general trends we observe in different localities and regions. We talk about Russians' attitudes toward the war and how they have changed (Chapter 1), how they are related to their attitudes toward the state and the government (Chapter 2), how they consume information about the war and propaganda (Chapter 3), and how Russians view the future—the end of the war, the development of the country, and their own plans (Chapter 4). In each chapter, we first describe the views of opponents and non-opponents of the war separately, and then compare them.

This research was organized and conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory. The PS Lab is an informal research collective studying politics and society in Russia and the post-Soviet space from a comparative perspective. The lab studied the Movement for Fair Elections of 2011-2013, and then post-protest local activism in Russia, the Euromaidan and Antimaidan movements in Ukraine, and the 2014 war in Donbass. Now most of their research is dedicated to Russian society during the war. In addition to systematic monitoring of Russians' perceptions of the war using qualitative methods, which includes this report, PS Lab participants have studied or are studying economic policy in wartime Russia, the attitudes of potential Russian conscripts to military service, resistance to conscription by relatives of those mobilized, and even the emigration of wealthy Russians (to Dubai). More information about the activities of the Public Sociology Laboratory can be found on this website.

In March 2024, the PS Lab was labeled as a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice. We are, of course, flattered by the recognition of our achievements, but this status creates additional risks for our researchers. That is why we have decided not to disclose the names of all those who collected the data, wrote the text of this report, and participated in the editing process.

This project has no sponsors. The idea and implementation was achieved solely by us. But in order to bring this complex idea to life, we received a small grant from an American university. This grant allowed us to pay for tickets, accommodations and professional fees for our researchers, as well as interview transcriptions and a symbolic reward for the authors of the report (which still does not compensate for the months of work spent analyzing the data). We continued going to our various day jobs to earn a living and worked on this project alongside our other professional duties. We were driven by a desire to understand—and to gain as broad an understanding as possible about Russian society during the war. We are all Russian citizens with different political views, but we take an anti-war stance. We realize that our views on the matter do not coincide with the views of many of our interlocutors. We respect the views of our interlocutors and do not evaluate them from a moral standpoint, but rather describe and analyze them from a research point of view.

We thank our friends and colleagues who helped us conduct this difficult fieldwork. We thank all our interlocutors who agreed to talk to us despite the complexity of the topic and censorship in the country.

2

Methodology

2.1 How we gathered data while living in our "fields"

2.1.1 Unusual work

This type of study may seem unusual for those who only have a passing familiarity with sociological and anthropological work. For some reason, society associates sociology with public opinion surveys and figures—sociologists report on what percentage of the population thinks a certain way. What social scientists themselves call "qualitative" methods and data are less familiar to the general public. Meanwhile, sociologists and anthropologists regularly use these methods to study the patterns and logic behind a particular phenomenon. And while in-depth interviews as a method of sociological study are becoming more well-known outside academia (after all, journalists also conduct interviews, although they're not quite as in-depth), ethnographic work and participant observation remains a less understood method. How can it be that these scientists simply live among their research subjects, talk to them, have a look at the local sights, keep diaries, and this is considered "scientific research?" "Hmm, are you sure that's really scientific?" We can already hear the skeptical remarks of some of our readers.

Sociologists and anthropologists have always used participant observation (or, in other words, ethnography) as a research method. Of course, ethnographic work is not quite that simple. Researchers don't simply "live" and "talk" with their research subjects—they have their own ways of doing so. Ethnographic work has great advantages over other research methods. In most cases, social scientists place people in an artificial survey or interview situation and assume that in a natural situation, these people would behave in a similar way. Ethnography, on the other hand, allows us to observe people's actions and thinking in real life situations as they naturally occur. Of course, this requires a lot of training and preparation, because ethnographic research, like any other kind of research, has its own strict rules and methods. For an ethnographic study to be successful, for example, one must be able to "enter the field" correctly, to ensure that the community being studied does not —consider the researcher a danger. So-called "gatekeepers" often help with this—people who are already well-acquainted with both the researcher and the community. Ethnographers also need a "legend"—a story about why they came and what they are studying. The legend must inspire trust in the researcher among the community and encourage them to cooperate, not draw their attention to the sensitive or unpleasant aspects of the research topic, while simultaneously

being truthful, lest it violate the fundamental ethical principles of social science. Ethnographers also need pre-determined research questions, principles, and observation focus, because it is impossible to take in everything around them. In other words, an ethnographer, like an interviewer, has guidelines. An experienced ethnographer must also be able to respond to unexpected circumstances, think creatively and adjust their behavior strategies, make decisions quickly, and always be ready to take risks—especially when they are studying something like Russian perceptions of the war during wartime. We will tell you how we tackled all these issues below.

In the fall of 2023, in order to study how people live during the war and how the war affects the everyday life of Russians (and not just their attitudes on the subject), we went to three Russian regions: the Sverdlovsk Oblast, the Republic of Buryatia and Krasnodar Krai. Krasnodar Krai intrigued us due to its proximity to the front lines: has this proximity made the effects of the war particularly noticeable or given people a specific, unusual perspective on the situation? The Republic of Buryatia stood out as a leader in the number of mobilized and contracted soldiers, as well as having one of the lowest average income levels in Russia and, finally, an ethnic minority living in the region that became famous during the war. Could the mass conscription of an ethnic minority to war "for Russia" cause discontent among people living in an ethnic republic and make them anti-war? The Sverdlovsk Oblast seemed like a nearly ideal "average" region – not too far and not too close to Moscow, with average national income levels (with the exception of the regional capital Yekaterinburg, which we did not include in the study), an average number of mobilized people, and so on. We wanted to see how "run-of-the-mill" Russians in areas that don't make headlines experience the effects of the war.

Seeing as during the first two waves of this study, our interlocutors were mainly residents of large cities, this time we wanted to talk to residents of smaller towns as well. Our researcher spent a little over three weeks in the Sverdlovsk Oblast in August and September 2023. She collected all her data from one small town, located six hours away from Yekaterinburg, but thanks to a special contact with an important figure in the town, during this time, she was able to practically become part of the local community. Another one of our researchers traveled to the Republic of Buryatia and lived there for about five weeks in October and early November 2023. She spent about three weeks in the regional capital, Ulan-Ude, and about two weeks in a small village a few hours' drive from the capital. Finally, the third researcher traveled to Krasnodar Krai and again spent five weeks collecting data from mid-October to late November 2023. She lived in Krasnodar for three weeks, spent another five days in a small resort town and stayed in a small industrial town for the remaining nine. Both were about 70 kilometers from the capital (but in different directions).

All three researchers had a common legend: they had come to study everyday life in the regions and the way it had changed over the past few years. This narrative allowed us to avoid saying "war" (or "special military operation") when first meeting interlocutors, but at the same time not to hide the true goals of our research. After all, the war is an important event that cannot help but have an impact on people's lives "over the past few years." All three researchers armed themselves with a common observation guide (more on this below) and kept ethnographic field journals. However, the study progressed differently in each of these regions, and these differences began with how the researchers secured their "entry into the field."

2.1.2 How we started: entering the field

The researcher who went to the small town in the Sverdlovsk Oblast had already visited for research purposes a year before while collecting data for another project that had nothing to do with the war. Consequently, she was already familiar with some of the town's residents and the realities of local life. But most importantly, during that previous trip she met and became friends with Tonya, a young entrepreneur who became the researcher's key interlocutor and gatekeeper in this new project. Tonya was privy to the details of our project during the planning stage, and she herself offered to help organize the fieldwork in her hometown. The researcher told her interlocutors that she had come to study changes in life in the region, and at the same time to see her friend Tonya. Since Tonya was respected by a wide range of city residents, her friendship gave the community more trust in the researcher. It also opened the doors to informal, friendly spaces of communication that were usually closed to researchers. Working together, Tonya and the researcher participated in informal get-togethers with her acquaintances and friends. Tonya's role in organizing the ethnographic work is described in more detail in Section 1.1.3 of the chapter devoted to the Sverdlovsk Oblast.

The researcher who visited Krasnodar Krai was also not there for the first time. Like her colleague, she already had experience doing fieldwork in this region as part of a study on another topic in the spring of 2022. Therefore, the researcher had several acquaintances in the capital who helped her find contacts. However, firstly, she did not develop close friendships with any of her acquaintances from the previous project, and secondly, even friendly relations with any of the residents of Krasnodar would hardly have helped her become "just one of the locals" in this city with a population in the millions. Nevertheless, she contacted her acquaintances to arrange a research interview or simply walk around the city so that they could chat in an informal setting. Sooner or later, her contacts led her to two other cities: Krasnodar residents recommended local residents to the researcher who could help her navigate the place. The researcher also had her own original strategy, which her colleagues collecting data in other regions did not use: she approached lonely city residents sitting on benches, introduced herself, told her story and asked for a research interview. To our surprise, most of the strangers she engaged in this way agreed to talk to her.

Finally, the researcher who collected data in the Republic of Buryatia had never been there before. However, she and other members of our team used their many social connections to find people in the region and provide the researcher with initial meetings. Some of these new acquaintances later helped the researcher find other contacts, shared information about the region with her, and facilitated her work in every possible way. The researcher also developed her own special strategy for collecting data: she regularly visited communities that were more or less open to newcomers and spent a lot of time in them, becoming as much a part of them as possible—and, of course, conducting observations. For example, she began to visit the army volunteer assistance center, where she participated with everyone else in weaving camouflage nets, making trench candles, army bags and stretchers; as well as a group of young Buryat musicians with whom she spent time in the studio and at street performances. In the small village she visited after her stay in Ulan-Ude, she had a key interlocutor and gatekeeper—an employee of the local supplementary education center, Megren. The researcher was introduced to Megren by her interlocutor from

the capital, and she ended up playing an important role in the fieldwork conducted in the village. Megren, like the researcher herself, had anti-war views, which formed the foundation for a fast friendship, and the researcher enlightened Megren on the details of the project. Throughout the researcher's stay in the village, Megren introduced her to local residents and filled her in on the specifics of her new, unfamiliar everyday life.

2.1.3 Why we were (usually) trusted

Social scientists who collect data on delicate, politically sensitive topics constantly face the issue of trust. This issue is especially evident during ethnographic work—no one would even talk to our researchers (let alone be friends with them) if they did not trust them. How did our researchers gain this trust by asking people questions for which a "wrong answer" (according to the state) could lead to jail time?

As in the first two waves of this research, we found it easiest (though not without some exceptions) to gain the trust of people with anti-war views. Firstly, in a number of cases, the researchers and their interviewees knew each other's anti-war views in advance—for example, from their prior relationship or when they were put in touch by mutual anti-war friends who introduced them to each other as people they could trust. Secondly, even if the researchers and their interlocutors did not know each other's anti-war views in advance, they often guessed them during the meeting—anti-war-minded Russians seemed to have learned to recognize each other without even directly talking about their attitudes toward the war. Thirdly, in some cases, when the researchers knew about the anti-war views of potential interlocutors and the latter did not know about the researchers' anti-war views, the researchers deliberately "let slip" something indicating their attitudes toward the war, signaling to their interlocutors that they could be trusted. "Since the interlocutor told me a lot about himself that he could be held accountable for, I told him how I went to rallies, so that it would be clear that I was from the same environment and was familiar with all of this," one of the researchers wrote in her field diary. Thus, an anti-war stance itself often becomes the basis for trust and solidarity.

Confident supporters of the war, whom we met very rarely, were also willing to talk openly with us. It is unlikely that this tendency is somehow connected with the behavior of the researchers—we observed something similar during the previous stages of this project, based on in-depth interviews. The point is rather that people who have a clear political position, which coincides with the position of the state, are willing to share it, and generally to discuss "political topics" in general.

As always, most difficult was gaining the trust of our apolitical interlocutors—those who cannot be said to be unequivocally "for" or "against" the war, those who do not want to think about political topics that are distant from their daily lives and prefer not to participate in heated discussions, just in case, to avoid unforeseen consequences. Even when these people completely trusted our researcher (for example, when they knew her as a friend of a friend, Tonya), they often simply did not want to argue about politically sensitive topics. They actively suggested "changing the topic from politics, there's enough of it on TV" and talking about something else, "anything but the war." Some of our researcher's old and new acquaintances in Krasnodar Krai had previously agreed to meet with her in order to discuss "the changes in the region over the past few years," but

then simply did not show up. Some residents of Krasnodar Krai and many residents of Buryatia were willing to speak to researchers, but categorically refused to speak on the record, despite our assurances of anonymity.

2.1.4 When discussing the war is "uncomfortable": How we overcame our fears

Researchers encountered various difficulties with ethnographic work depending on their chosen behavior strategy in the field. They all experienced some degree of discomfort, embarrassment and even fear when raising the subject of the war, which in and of itself illustrates how taboo this theme is in modern Russian society. Nonetheless, they all had to overcome these feelings and talk about the war. Their approaches, however, were different.

At first, the researcher sent to the ***Sverdlovsk Oblast*** preferred to communicate only with Tonya and her close friends, and in informal settings. She simply couldn't imagine how she would ask questions about the war in a formal interview setting with a recording device sitting in full view. On the third day of her stay at Tonya's, she met Alevtina Nikiforovna, an elderly woman who was cleaning Tonya's apartment. After chatting with Alevtina Nikiforovna, the researcher wrote down her impressions of the conversation in her ethnographic diary:

> "I am concerned by AN's words that people no longer discuss the war and are generally afraid to speak out on the matter. I don't know where I can catch conversations about the war in a natural setting, given that there are almost no public spaces in the city where they could be accidentally overheard. And I'm also starting to find the very idea of trying to ask people about the war in a recorded interview format dubious. Most likely, no one will talk to me about it on the record."

Since the researcher planned to speak with people she knew in one way or another—either through Tonya or from her previous visit for a different research project—she was worried not so much about anonymous tip-offs to the authorities about her political stances, but rather vague suspicions, not fully formulated by the interlocutors themselves, that would make collecting data more complicated. During one of her first get-togethers with Tonya's friends, one of them, Petya, who was usually talkative, was silent all evening. In her diary, the researcher contemplates what the cause of this silence may be:

> "He looked at me a little warily. He clearly didn't understand from my behavior who I am and what I'm doing here: the brief introduction of me as an 'anthropologist' whose work consists of 'studying the city' evidently didn't sound particularly coherent or trust inspiring. Moreover, I actively participated in the conversation and asked a lot of questions, which meant that I was behaving in a manner not very consistent with local gender norms."

Our researcher was only able to have her first conversation about the war with strangers five days later. As sometimes happens during ethnographic work, a suitable situation simply fell into her lap. While working at a computer in a city café, the researcher noticed a noisy group of men and women who, clinking glasses, exchanged a few phrases about the war. They turned out to be

former classmates who had gathered to celebrate another anniversary of graduating high school. The female members soon left the party. Left alone, the men, one of whom turned out to be a retired FSB officer, struck up a conversation with our researcher themselves. The researcher decided to take advantage of the moment, played along with the men and, overcoming her fear, turned the conversation to the topic of war. After the conversation, she made the following entry in her diary:

> "I felt some anxiety when raising the topic of war during our conversation. My initial approach through Prigozhin was successful, in my opinion, because expressing interest in the fate of such a prominent political figure just a few days after his death seemed quite natural. But by returning the conversation to the topic of war several times after it had broken off or moved on to other topics, I felt that I was taking a risk. Although I do not believe that the FSB officer with low-level expertise could see through my ruse (that is, figure out that I was asking about the war specifically, and that my interest was not at all idle), I did not feel safe during the conversation. This was one of the reasons I frequently employed the technique of actively agreeing with what the interlocutors were saying, so as not to be in constant confrontation with them."

Only the next day, after a week in the city, did the researcher finally decide to conduct a recorded interview with one of the residents she had met during her previous visit. She intended to ask him questions about the war, despite being wrought with feelings of inappropriateness and fear. And she succeeded! In her ethnographic diary, she writes:

> "I had to bring Alexey back to the topic of war several times on a more concrete, rather than abstract level. Each time I felt uncomfortable, since I had to overcome the interlocutor's resistance, but I decided that I would try to stick to this line despite the 'natural' dynamics of the conversation."

On an abstract level, Alexey, contrary to the researcher's expectations, was perfectly willing to talk about the war. However, the researcher's specific interest did not go unnoticed:

> "[After the interview] Alexey, looking at me attentively, with a certain suspicion in his gaze, asked: 'Why do you ask so much about the war?' I decided to answer indirectly, that is, without revealing my cards regarding the main topic of the project, but at the same time sincerely. I said that we are studying how life in the regions has changed, and accordingly, all large-scale events taking place in our country are important in order to understand how they affect or do not affect people's everyday life—and how, from such a perspective, can we ignore the war? After all, this is such an important event for modern Russia. Alexey nodded understandingly—it seemed to me that this rather emotional response convinced him."

From then on, the researcher learned to overcome her embarrassment and fear and always ask questions about the war, both during informal conversations and during more formal, on-the-record interviews. Moreover, during informal conversations with various of Tonya's acquaintances

over dinner and drinks at Tonya's house, the researcher and Tonya spontaneously developed a unique experimental method of behavior. First, they "threw" the topic of war into the conversation (remembering, for example, a recently deceased city resident or reading the latest news about the war aloud from the phone) and monitored the reaction of their interlocutors. Secondly, when talking about the war with apolitical war-justifying residents, they tried to use the language of their interlocutors, playing along with them, but at the same time not distorting their own anti-war stance. For example, they said that they were also worried about their country, they also were unhappy that "our boys" are dying, and they also do not understand why all this was necessary. Thirdly, sometimes, reacting to an expression of dissatisfaction on the part of their interlocutors ("who are they dying for?"), discontent expressed by their interlocutors ("For whom are our boys dying?"), the researcher and her assistant Tonya asked somewhat provocative questions, for example: "Maybe then there was no need to start this war?" and again observed the reactions of other conversationalists. The results of these spontaneous experiments later allowed us to formulate important observations and conclusions about the way Russians criticize and justify the war.

Like Alexei, whom we quoted above, several other of our researcher's interlocutors were interested in the reasons behind her and Tonya's special focus on the subject of war, but they, like Alexei, were satisfied with her explanations. All of her interlocutors had something to say about the war, even if they did not want to talk about it for too long.

The researcher who went to the **Republic of Buryatia**, as we recall, had never been there before. In addition, the local residents and researchers in the region she had contacted before the trip scared her: they frequently asked whether she was afraid to go to such a dangerous region to study the perception of war, and all alone, at that. This is why the researcher behaved very cautiously from the very beginning and almost never struck up conversations about the war with her interlocutors if she felt uncomfortable.

Within the first few days of her stay in Ulan-Ude, she visited a volunteer organization providing assistance to the Russian army. Volunteers are always happy to see newcomers and therefore rarely treat them with suspicion. The researcher chose a strategy of non-interference: working side-by-side with them, listening to their conversations, but not asking unnecessary questions. Immediately after the end of the first day with the volunteers, she wrote in her diary:

> "I feel too unsafe to actively push the topic of the war. And is it even necessary? Wouldn't it be better to first listen to how they themselves discuss political events in the most comfortable and familiar environment? I will stick to this tactic for now."

It quickly became clear that, with rare exceptions, the volunteers did not talk about the war, so from time to time the researcher still had to "throw" political topics into the conversation. However, she decided to do this very rarely. When, two days later, she found herself in a company of young Buryat musicians, already aware of the tendency of many residents not to talk about the war, she tried to start such conversations herself. Despite the fact that the researcher did this only when it seemed appropriate to her, she continued to feel uncomfortable. Here is what she writes in her ethnographic diary:

> "From the guys' reactions, I came to the conclusion that they were not very interested in talking about the war and mobilization, and even that they were bothered by my

> constant attempts to talk about it. So I decided not to bring up the topic anymore today, unless they themselves start it."

When the researcher conducted more formal interviews on the record, she also behaved cautiously. For example, if she thought that her interlocutor was suspicious, she skipped questions about the war. Since some of her interlocutors shared her concerns, she was even more convinced of them:

> "During the walk, Batod expressed surprise that I'm not afraid to interview people in Ulan-Ude about the war. Apparently, by this point he had already guessed that I was not just interested in changes in the region, but in changes related to the war."

The researcher's ethnographic diary describes a variety of situations in which she noticed the suspiciousness of her interlocutors and, reacting to it, avoided asking pointed questions. For example, upon arrival in the village of Udurgh, her key interlocutor Megren brought her to the local supplementary education center with many different clubs and employees. The researcher actively communicated with everyone, telling them about herself and the project, but avoided mentioning the war as her special interest, as she thought she had caught suspicious glances from some of the employees. When she told the head of the center about the purpose of her research (studying life in the region and changes within it), she again caught a wary and confused look. Then she added that she was especially interested in environmental initiatives in the region and that is why she came here, to Udurgh, and the head of the center relaxed upon hearing a more familiar research topic.

In any case, unlike the researcher who settled in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, the researcher in Buryatia did not constantly strive to overcome her own sense of discomfort, but, on the contrary, focused on it. Her main strategy was to see how military topics naturally arose in informal conversations and interviews, and only then seize on the topic and develop it.

As we recall, the researcher who went to **Krasnodar Krai** had been there before, but none of her local contacts were capable of playing the role that Tonya did in the Sverdlovsk Oblast. Knowing that one way or another, she'd have to communicate with people she didn't know very well, the researcher nevertheless decided that she would speak directly with her interlocutors about the war and observe their reactions. She spoke a lot with people in the service industries—taxi drivers, for example—and chatted with her new pals during the walks they'd take together, but she also approached strangers sitting alone on benches and convinced them to give anonymous interviews about how life has changed in the region. Our researcher tried to ask each one of these very different interlocutors questions about the war, and because of this, she faced the largest number of unpleasant, and even dangerous situations.

Despite the fact that the majority of the strangers sitting on benches, taken off guard by her approach, were quite open to her suggestion and were even unfazed by her questions about the "special operation," she was unable to completely avoid any shows of aggression. Once, flying high off of a successful conversation with a stranger, she approached another man, received his express permission to ask a few questions for sociological research, took out her recording device and pressed the button. The man reacted to the recording device as a bull to a red flag: he cried

out, saying that he was categorically opposed to speaking on record and that there was nothing to assure him that our researcher was really a sociologist. Astonished, the researcher offered to show the man her working credentials. The rest of the conversation is described in her ethnographic diary:

> "He says to me: 'What do I care about your credentials? I hate that Moscow of yours, if only I could kill all Muscovites.' Okay, I say, you can hate them, but killing them is a little much, there are a lot of different kinds of people there, why kill all of them? 'Every last one,' he says, because all sorts of people like me come here and snoop around (I'll note that I didn't say a word about the 'special operation'). 'Why are you so nervous?" I say, "We ask questions anonymously, this is just scientific research." He answered something like, who knows what kind of research it is and who I work for, and what I want to know anyway."

However, despite shows of aggression like this, anonymous conversations with strangers in a big city could hardly pose a real threat to our researcher. In the end, neither of these people knew anything about the other. A much more frightening story happened to our researcher during her visit to one of the schools in Novonekrasovsk, where she met her good friend, a teacher named Tamara. Tamara wanted to help the researcher and persuaded the school principal to talk to her in the format of a formal interview on the record. The principal calmly answered the questions—but only up to a certain point. In her ethnographic diary, the researcher writes:

> "I had the idea to stop there, but then I still decided to risk it and move on to direct questions about the war. I was a little scared, but at the same time, some sort of wild, gambling curiosity flared up within me. I asked him how the special military operation had affected his life. He immediately demanded that I turn off the recorder and show him my documents. He also asked why I was even asking such questions. I turned off the recorder and asked what documents he needed; I had a passport and work certifications. He asked for my work certifications. I took them out. He read them. Then he asked if I have permission from the city, district, and regional administrations, and how I got here in the first place. I said that I had arrived by train. He was appalled—how can you just arrive by train, check into a hotel, and go around asking such questions?"

As a result, the school principal simply refused to continue the conversation, and the researcher, happy that she had gotten off so easily, went about her business. The principal probably didn't need any more attention from the authorities than she herself did, so the best way for him to avoid any problems was to send the uninvited guest away, rather than to tip off the authorities about her. The researcher recalled this story with fear for a long time after—for example, the next day she wrote in her ethnographic diary:

> "A car parked right under my window and shone its headlight in—it scared me a little, because my window was positioned in such a way that you could climb in if you wanted. But I thought, what nonsense, who here would be after me? To assume that

> the school principal had figured out where I had my rented apartment and sent someone to kidnap me is very stupid and paranoid. The car stopped shining its headlights, and I fell asleep."

Thus, the researcher collecting data in the Krasnodar region overcame her feelings of fear and started talking about the war, both in interviews and during informal conversations.

We could see that all three researchers faced the need to talk about the unpleasant and sometimes dangerous topic of war while feeling resistance from their interlocutors and most importantly, from themselves. All of them successfully coped with this task, but each in a slightly different way. One of them preferred to see how the subject arose naturally in conversations and only then develop upon it (Republic of Buryatia); another started talking about the war, despite her discomfort, but more often in informal contexts than during formal interviews (Sverdlovsk Region); and, finally, the third asked questions about the so-called "special operation" at any convenient opportunity, despite the possible risks (Krasnodar Region). Each of the researchers spent about a month in their region and, of course, during this time resorted to different behavior strategies; nevertheless, one strategy always dominated in the case of each particular researcher.

2.2 What did we gather? Description of data

As a result of our visits to three Russian regions, we collected two types of data: in-depth interviews and ethnographic field notes.

The first two waves of research, the basis of our first and second analytical reports, respectively, were also based on in-depth interviews. However, the interviews collected in the three Russian regions—although they, too, were conducted using a set of guidelines and with a tape recorder—are somewhat different from those we had collected before. First, many of these interviews (except, of course, a dozen conversations with strangers on benches in Krasnodar Krai) were conducted with people the researchers already knew (they had become acquainted with them during previous trips for ethnographic studies; interviews were conducted during these same trips, but later), and therefore in an atmosphere trust that was greater than usual. Second, these interviews, unlike the previous ones, did not focus on the war—this was only one of the topics discussed in the interviews. Thus, we were able to shift the emphasis from a politically sensitive topic and talk, among other things, with those people who would have refused to discuss the war directly. Thirdly, during the interviews, we avoided direct questions about our interviewees' attitudes towards the war; however, after discussing the impact of the war on their lives, this attitude was, in one way or another, revealed.

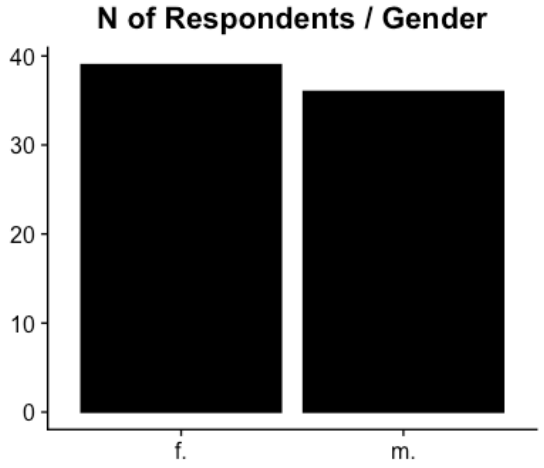
The interviews usually began with questions about the specifics of life in the locality, its positive and negative aspects, and local urban (or rural) problems. Then we asked our interviewees whether they had felt any changes in their lives over the past few years and discussed changes related to the pandemic, and then — related to the "special operation." We talked a little about the perception of war and media consumption, but almost never asked direct questions about our interviewees' attitudes toward it (which, however, still became clear during the conversation). Finally,

we asked interviewees about key moments in their life (study, work, hobbies, etc.) and ended the conversation with questions about their ideas about the future and life planning.

We managed to collect 75 of these interviews. Seventeen were conducted in the Sverdlovsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia, while the remaining 41 were from Krasnodar Krai. We did not select our interviewees based on their attitudes to the war, so, as expected, most of those we spoke to were apolitical Russians who justified the war, but at the same time were not confident supporters. Quite a few of our interviewees were opponents of the war. The minority were confident supporters of the military invasion. Below we describe all interviewees—that is, those with whom we spoke on the record—by four characteristics: gender, age, education and income. This description allows us to show the characteristics of our sample and its biases.

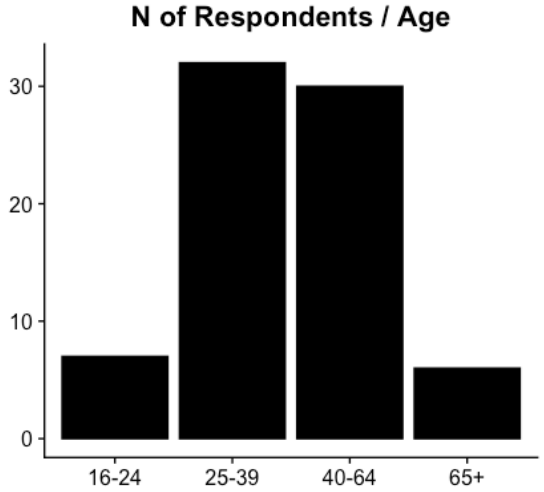
Interviewee Gender

There were approximately equal numbers of men and women among our interviewees, with a very slight bias towards women.



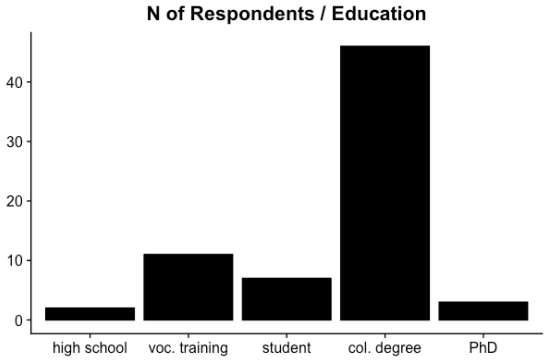
Interviewee Age

The most represented age categories among those with whom we spoke on the record were people from 25 to 39 and from 40 to 64 years old. There were much fewer very young people (under 24) and elderly people (65 and older) among our interviewees.



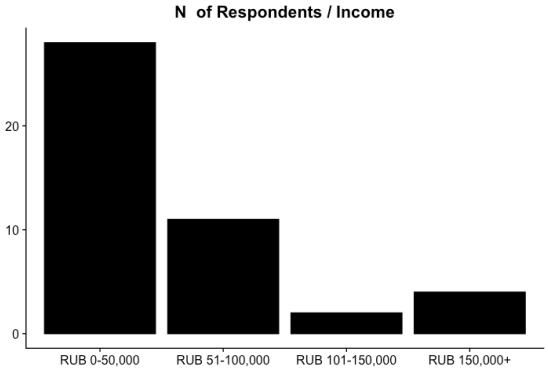
Interviewee Education

Overall, our interviewee pool was skewed towards people with higher education. It is important to note that this bias occurred due to the data collected in Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Buryatia: among our interviewees from the Sverdlovsk Oblast, the majority do not have higher education.



Interviewee Income

Finally, this time around we were able to speak with the lower-income population: the majority of our interviewees receive a monthly income of less than 50,000 rubles.



In one of the chapters of this report, we supplement our data with focus group research collected in collaboration with Chronicle and ExtremeScan. Eight focus groups were held in November 2023 in the four Russian cities of Samara, Rostov, Irkutsk and Izhevsk. The study was devoted to the perception of the war by Russians and how Russians see the consequences of the war for Russian society.

The most valuable materials that form the basis of this report are our ethnographic observations of everyday life during the war and our retellings of informal conversations about the war. All of this is recorded in three ethnographic diaries (totaling 330,000 words, about 110,000 words each). Each day, the researchers wrote down their observations, impressions, and recollections of conversations in the diaries. What exactly did they observe? The diaries contain the following types of data:

- Descriptions of how the war is reflected in the public space, for example, whether there are anti- or pro-war symbols or military service posters in the streets, whether people talk about the war in public places, and so on.

- Descriptions of how the war manifests in the cultural life of these cities and villages—in museums, at exhibitions, at events in local cultural centers, and the like.
- Descriptions of various organized forms and practices of support for the army or for refugees associated with the so-called "special operation."
- And most importantly, recollections of numerous informal conversations in which the topic of war was raised by the researchers or their interviewees. This is perhaps the most unique type of data we collected. The researchers engaged in conversations with their acquaintances, new and old, during walks or evening get-togethers; they always struck up conversations with those to whom strangers often speak—taxi drivers, manicurists, massage therapists, bartenders. Some of the researchers deliberately threw the topic of war into such conversations, others waited until it arose naturally and developed upon it—and then all the researchers recounted the war-related fragments of their conversations in their diaries. Often, the researchers had already recorded any particularly vivid expressions in their phone notes during the course of the conversation.

In this report, we quote both interview fragments and passages from researchers' ethnographic diaries. Naturally, all interview fragments are direct quotes (translated from Russian to English, adhering to the original sentiment as closely as possible) since the interviews, as we recall, were recorded using an audio recorder. Interlocutor quotes that we pulled from the ethnographic diaries were written from memory by our researchers and do not convey verbatim speech, although the researchers tried to remember their interlocutors' words as accurately as possible. In such cases, quotation marks do not indicate literal, word-for-word speech, but that the fragments placed in them do not belong to us, the authors of the report, but to our interlocutors. In addition, we periodically cite fragments of ethnographic diaries with our researchers' reflections that they made on the spot. Such reflections may sometimes sound too subjective and may contain value judgments, because our researchers are ordinary people, with their own views on the war, with their own fears and emotions. Nevertheless, in the text of the report itself, we do not in any way evaluate the statements and views of our interlocutors from a moral point of view—our task is not to diagnose society, but to understand the logic behind the thoughts and actions of our interlocutors.

Of course, all data in the report is anonymous. We have kept the names of the regional capitals, Krasnodar and Ulan-Ude, which our researchers visited—it would be impossible to pick out our interlocutors from among the millions of residents of these cities. However, we have replaced the names of small towns in which we collected data. Cheryomushkin, Yuzhny Sokol, Novonekrasovsk and Udurgh do not exist on the maps of the corresponding regions of Russia, but behind each of them there is a real city or village visited by one of our researchers. All proper names mentioned in the report have also been changed, but the stories of these people are completely real.

2.3 What do we make of all this? Analysis of the data

We first worked with our data using thematic coding: interviews or diaries were divided into a set of thematic blocks, and then blocks on the same topic were collected together and analyzed. During the analysis of these thematic blocks, we combined a variety of methods, but mainly elements of what in the social sciences is called narrative analysis, or discourse analysis. We paid special attention not just to what our interlocutors said, but to how they said it: what grammatical constructions, turns of phrase, and slips of the tongue they used, and what these constructions, turns of phrase, and slips of the tongue tell us about the ways in which Russians think and experience wartime reality.

Our data and analysis methods are certainly not without their limitations. As opposed to representative surveys, qualitative data—interviews and observations—do not allow us to predict what proportion of the Russian population perceives events in one way or another. In order to make this sort of prediction, we must compare the results of our analysis of representative surveys (which we do, from time to time, throughout the report). Our sample is no longer skewed towards people from capitals and large cities. Moreover, in one region, the Sverdlovsk Oblast, it is not skewed towards people with higher education—at least half of our interlocutors in Cheryomushkin are people with only secondary or specialized secondary education. However, in the other two regions, the vast majority of our interviewees have a higher education, so in working with the data, we are likely to miss some types of perceptions of the war that are typical for people from other social groups. Our data allow us to see, for example, that the economy—both the economic situation of individuals and the economic specificity of settlements and regions—influences the role that war plays in the lives of Russians and how they perceive it. However, we do not have enough data to describe this influence in detail. Finally, although we found many similarities in the perception of the war by residents of three very different regions, this does not mean that residents from all four corners of Russia experience the war in a similar way. In general, we describe some typical aspects of everyday life for Russians during the war, as well as typical ways of perceiving the war in the fall of 2023 and their dynamics, but we do not offer an exhaustive description and quantitative assessment of these processes.

3

Part 1: The War in the Regions

3.1 Chapter 1. The Sverdlovsk Oblast: "There's no fucking way I'm sending you off to war for a few rubles!"

3.1.1 Introduction: The Sverdlovsk Oblast and the city of Cheryomushkin

The Sverdlovsk Oblast is situated on the border between Europe and Asia—between the Northern and Middle Urals (bordered by the Komi Republic, Perm Krai, the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous District, Bashkortostan, as well as the Tyumen, Kurgan and Chelyabinsk Oblasts). By Russian standards, where proximity to the center is a significant socio-economic parameter, Sverdlovsk Oblast is neither too close nor too far from Moscow.

The Sverdlovsk Oblast is one of the top ten most industrially developed regions of Russia. Yekaterinburg is the fourth most populous city in the country, and the region itself is the fifth most populous region. The average per capita income in 2023 was 53,300 RUB (which is almost equal to the Russian average of 51,000 RUB). At the same time, income growth reached 6.5% in real terms compared to the previous year, which is higher than the Russian average growth (5.6%).

According to research by *Vazhnye Istorii* and the Conflict Intelligence Team, the percentage of mobilized citizens from Sverdlovsk coincides almost perfectly with official figures for the overall percentage of mobilized citizens out of the total eligible for mobilization. Ministry of Defense data states that in 2023, 12.5 thousand residents of the Sverdlovsk Oblast were contracted to fight in the war, and by April 2024, another 2.5 thousand had joined them. The regional government paid 100 thousand rubles to everyone who signed a contract, and in June 2024 the sum was increased to 400 thousand, regional media reported. The number of confirmed losses in the war as of July 2024 was almost 2,000—one of the highest among the Russian regions, although this is partly due to the large population.

Starting in the beginning of the 18th century, the Sverdlovsk Oblast has been home to Russia's main mining plants, which are still in operation today. Consequently, many settlements formed around industrial enterprises. In some industrial Ural cities, the war had a significant impact on the economy: production facilities that had been in decline in recent years were now in "wartime mode," demand for products soared, salaries increased, and specialists from other places began to come to the cities.

However, none of this happened in Cheryomushkin, where we conducted our research. The population of Cheryomushkin is almost 12 thousand. A significant number of its residents are employed in the public sector and receive relatively modest salaries by Russian standards; the city is subsidized, and its situation directly depends on the distribution of regional and federal budgets. Working at a pulp mill is considered a relatively profitable employment option for Cheryomushkin residents. After full-scale hostilities broke out, according to the testimony of our researcher's interlocutors, business in this sector went into decline, since the products were mainly manufactured for export, which proved difficult under sanctions.

There are several penal colonies within an hour's drive from Cheryomushkin. Some city residents either work there themselves or know many of the employees and prisoners personally. For this reason, residents of Cheryomushkin know what is going on in the prisons, and the news about Wagner recruiting prisoners was common knowledge for many city residents.

According to Cheryomushkin residents themselves, their city is relatively poor by regional standards. Many homes are not connected to a centralized water or gas. supply. Installing plumbing for water costs residents about 100 thousand rubles—for many, this is too much, and so they use public wells, carry water by hand and build toilets outside. According to the subjective feelings of our researcher, who lived in Cheryomushkin for about a month, the city resembles a large village settlement in terms of development, everyday life and social organization.

Cheryomushkin has the "classic" set of public spaces and organizations that you would expect to find in almost any Russian city of its size—a town square, cultural center, museums, churches, a few administrative buildings, schools and daycares. There are also several cafés, grocery and hardware stores, pharmacies and beauty salons. Despite its small size, it could not be called isolated. Tourists traveling through the Urals often pass through, and the residents of Cheryomushkin themselves regularly travel to larger neighboring cities to visit relatives, or for shopping, entertainment or medical services.

Cheryomushkin, as well as the Sverdlovsk Oblast in general, is inhabited mainly by ethnic Russians. Overall, the city does not have any prominent ethnic, labor, cultural, religious or any other groups that would significantly sway the course of the city's social life, identity or relationships among its residents.

3.1.2 The war in public spaces

The urban landscape in the face of the war

If, as a thought experiment, we were to imagine a person who fell asleep on the night of February 23rd, 2022 and suddenly woke up in Cheryomushkin in the fall of 2023, it would be difficult for them to guess that a full-scale war had been going on for the last year and a half. After walking the full length and breadth of the city during her several weeks in the city, our researcher only encountered a few symbols reminiscent of the military conflict: two or three cars with "Z" stickers and patriotic slogans, a faded pair of dusty flags—one with a "Z," the other in the colors of the St. George ribbon—on the facade of a city hotel, not particularly noticeable. There were no military contract ads or symbols on the doors of government institutions.

According to local businesswoman Tonya, who is well acquainted with the urban context and a key interlocutor with a special role in this field (see section 1.1.3), visible signs of war have almost completely disappeared from Cheryomushkin over the past year. People have removed stickers from their cars; the previously well-attended send-offs to the front, as well as funerals and burial services for mobilized soldiers, have ceased to attract outside audiences; city residents have begun to discuss the war among themselves less often.

There are practically no public spaces in Cheryomushkin where it would be customary to gather and communicate. Perhaps the only such place is Café Ulybka ("smile" in English) where our researcher came every day to have lunch, work on her laptop, or meet with interlocutors. Although she tried to listen in on conversations being held at neighboring tables, she only once happened to overhear a discussion about the war. During the day, a group of eight or nine smartly dressed men and women aged 50-55 gathered at Ulybka (as it turned out later, it was a class reunion). Here is what our researcher wrote in her field diary:

> "At one point, the music got quieter and I managed to make out the words of the toast one of the women was giving: 'How about, to Victory!' The group approved of the toast: 'To victory!' 'To victory!' As soon as the clinking of glasses died down, another female voice said: 'And when will we see this victory?' The question was addressed to a tall, heavyset man with a low voice. I could only catch individual words of his answer—'Poles,' 'fascists,' 'NATO.' At the end of his monologue, the woman responds: 'Ah, so we have to wait a while…' Another woman takes up the conversation: 'When I was young, I always thought about World War II, about what a pity it was that I didn't live at that time—I would have loved to accomplish such a feat! And now I think: what a fool I was! Now I understand that I definitely wouldn't be able to do that.' The man's answer is again incomprehensible. I only understand that the conversation was about Prigozhin. About ten minutes after the 'victory' toast, the conversation switched to other everyday topics, and the discussion of politics and the war was not brought up again."

It is difficult to determine how commonplace a discussion like the one described by our researcher is for Cheremushkin. Perhaps the fact that they were toasting prompted the woman to bring up the topic of war, since "To victory!" is a common toast that is familiar to Russians from at least dozens of Soviet films. Maybe others seized on the topic and shifted it from a ceremonial setting to a "pressing" question ("And when will we see this victory?"), since there was an "expert" sitting at the table: later, our researcher found out that the man to whom the question was addressed was a retired FSB officer. The main thing here is that firstly, the topic of war arose by itself, was easily picked up and did not surprise those present (evidence that they could bring up the topic of the war in this mixed company), and secondly, that it was just as easily dismissed, dissolving into everyday chatter (that is, it did not arouse any intense or sustained interest in anyone present).

In the absence of public spaces where Cheryomushkin residents could meet and talk face to face, many citizens actively use the city's public VKontakte page. According to interlocutors, in the initial period after the start of the full-scale invasion, people used the group to speak out about

the war and had discussions in the comments. With time, however, “undesirable” comments and posts (sometimes along with their authors) began to be quickly deleted and blocked from the public page—probably by a local official who was one of the group’s administrators. Retiree Alevtina Nikiforovna, who works part-time as a cleaner and housekeeper, with whom our researcher had already developed a trusting relationship, explained that comments criticizing the war were ”attacked” and their authors were showered with typical insults (“ukrop,” literally translated as “dill,” a slang term for Ukrainians). In addition, one of the residents of Cheryomushkin was fined a significant amount by local standards for reposting a video with anti-war content. This news spread by word of mouth (our researcher, for example, heard it from several people), after which the townspeople stopped leaving comments or even reactions to the news on social networks, fearing repercussions.

Public events and institutional support for war

In the first few months after the outbreak of full-scale war, and then again after the announcement of mobilization, official ”patriotic” and ”volunteer” events were held in Cheryomushkin aimed at creating a positive image of the ”special operation” and helping the front: ceremonial farewells to mobilized soldiers, public funerals for city residents killed in the war, volunteer gatherings at the local museum to weave camouflage nets and other formats of institutional support for the war and investments in its image. According to interlocutors, the intensity of these events has decreased in the last year. At the time of our researcher’s visit, her interlocutors could not recall a single public event in recent months related to the war that had been relevant to the life of the city.

Against the backdrop of a general decline in interest in the war among city residents who were involved in one way or another in supporting the front, one person stands out: the local church priest, Father Konstantin. Just recently he went to the front, where he conducted funeral services and blessed soldiers before battle. In Cheryomushkin, Father Konstantin regularly organizes so-called prayer services for the soldiers. In the interview, contrary to the expectations of the researcher, who assumed that the priest would use theological arguments to justify the war, he spoke to her in secular language, using television clichés—for example, he earnestly discussed the threat from “foreign agents” and “traitors to the motherland.” Incidentally, he was not alone in this opinion—the parsons of two other churches in neighboring villages our researcher visited either ignored any attempts to shift the conversation about the war to a religious/dogmatic perspective, or actively resisted them. In the interview, Father Konstantin also mentioned his connections with law enforcement agencies. It was difficult to understand to what extent his pro-war position was the result of professional commitment, and to what extent it was a consequence of his personal preferences. However, the impression our researcher got was that the priest was a truly confident, ideological supporter of the war. At least, his public activities—prayers and trips to the front—seemed more like a manifestation of personal enthusiasm, and not like the execution of orders handed down ”from above.”

Our researcher was able to attend two of the prayer services held by Father Konstantin. The first had no more than 15 attendants, who all looked like ordinary parishioners—from an outside perspective, it would be difficult to guess that it was somehow connected to the war. After the

service ended, the priest briefly recounted his month-long trip to the front where he had blessed the soldiers for battle, adding that they were all "holding up well, defending the Motherland" and that "they need prayer, they need God." There were twice as many people at the second service. The regular congregation was joined by women who, according to Darya, a teacher and active parishioner of the church, were relatives of deployed soldiers. In the hands of all those gathered, the researcher noticed flyers with lists containing the names of people who needed prayers for health (all the names in them were male). One of the subsections of the list was entitled "Civilians of Donbass." The hour-long service ended with a sermon by Father Konstantin, in which he recommended praying "for our fathers, husbands and brothers" and "not forgetting that the lives of our soldiers depend on prayer." The priest also suggested "not slacking off," "uniting not only at the front, but also here in the church," and "praying as much as possible so that our loved ones return alive and well," because victory in the "sacred special military operation" is ours. The sermon ended with a collective prayer, after which the parishioners began to disperse. The women greeted each other and chatted—it was obvious that this was not the first time they had gathered in this group setting.

Thus, on the one hand, Father Konstantin creates an ideologically charged space around himself. On the other hand, apparently, it attracts a limited circle of the same people. The focus of this priest's activity on a narrow, specific audience can also be explained by the low popularity of the church as a whole. In this respect, Cheryomushkin is no different from the rest of Russia, where only about 9% of people attend church at least once a month.

Municipal public events that were, in some way or another, connected to the war deserve special note. From the very first day, our researcher followed the city bulletin and scrupulously studied information boards and posters, hoping to find in Cheryomushkin the fruits of massive institutional support for the war, in which thousands of Russian schools, district cultural centers, and other agencies and institutions are involved. The first find was a showing of the film *The Witness* in the movie theater at the cultural center. This is a work of propaganda, the purpose of which is to present an alternative view of the events in the Ukrainian city of Bucha and to challenge the idea that Russian soldiers committed war crimes here. What follows is an entry from the researcher's field diary on the day of the screening:

> "The film *The Witness* is scheduled to be shown at 6 p.m., so in anticipation of the opportunity to see something ethnographically valuable, I left Ulybka and headed to the nearby cultural center. It was 5:55 p.m., but the Community Centre lobby was completely empty. I turned to the bored cashier and found out that I was the first to arrive at the screening—not a single ticket for the film had been sold yet. I took a seat on a bench opposite the entrance so as not to miss any potential visitors, but not a single person entered the cultural center in the next 15 minutes. I asked the cashier if this happened often. According to her, 'not often, but it does happen.'"

On the one hand, the fact that the film was totally ignored by the Cheryomushkin audience on a Sunday evening is itself telling. On the other hand, judging by the words of the cashier and several other residents of Cheryomushkin, the cinema is not particularly popular among the townspeople. It is worth noting that another event hosted by the theater—an evening of movies in a tent in the

open air on the town square, announced and organized by the cultural center—also did not take place. Our researcher decided to attend the event, since the program included a film with patriotic content. However, when she arrived at the square at the appointed time, she found not only no tent, but also no signs of public life at all.

Our researcher pinned her greatest hopes on a concert to "start off the creative season" in the cultural center called "We Don't Abandon Our Own." The poster for the "charity concert in support of the participants in the special military operation" appeared on the notice board a couple of weeks before and promised encouraging ethnographic prospects. After the empty movie theater and town square, the researcher expected to finally see how public support for the war was organized in Cheryomushkin. But when the researcher found herself at the event, she could not shake the feeling that the organizers approached the military-patriotic content of the concert purely formally. Here is how she describes the event in her diary:

> "In the lobby of the cultural center, right opposite the entrance, the frame for a camouflage net is stretched. Next to it, a woman in a 'folklore' costume is trying to figure out how to weave it. Nearby, on the sofas, a group of children aged 11–13 are playing on a tablet. To the right of the net, there is a stand with photographs of people in military uniforms with the caption 'Defenders of the Fatherland.' Most of the photographs are reports on patriotic acts: school children writing letters to soldiers, women weaving nets and sewing socks, men in camouflage loading boxes of humanitarian aid into cars. In one of the photographs, I notice Father Konstantin posing with a trench candle. On the other side, there is an installation and photo opportunity set up like a 'Russian peasant house' with a samovar and kosovorotkas [a Russian peasant shirt]. Another woman in a red dress and a kokoshnik is sitting in front of a stack of banya brooms (evidently a master class in broom weaving).
>
> Opening number in the hall: there are about ten people on stage, all with microphones. Among them are a cultural center methodologist, an ensemble leader, a library employee, and a local theater actor. They perform a composition in a major key:
>
> 'We wish you love,
>
> And abundance untold,
>
> May the joy in your heart
>
> Always sparkle like gold.
>
> We wish on a dream,
>
> That you will fly free
>
> You will reach that star,
>
> And rejoice in your victory
>
> You will reach that star,
>
> And rejo-o-o-ice in your v-i-i-i-ctory!'"

As our researcher later explained, this song is called "Happy Birthday!" In the original, the performer sang in the first person singular—the researcher did not notice any other changes in the lyrics of the song. This song was likely chosen as the opening number because of the word "victory," which is drawn out on a long note in—both the original and on the Cheryomushkin cultural center stage—in the last lines of the chorus. That being said, the original lyrics of the song are obviously not about victory on the battlefield, but about the birthday girl or boy's abstract individual achievement. Probably, the organizers of the event assumed that if it was performed at a patriotic concert, the word "victory" would acquire new meaning. There was nothing reminiscent of the war or other current socio-political events in the stage presentation of the performers. Equally telling was the poster for the event, which depicted a dance of a folk group in multi-colored dresses on the stage of the cultural center. Not a single detail—except, of course, the name of the concert—hinted at the war.

All the numbers that followed seemed typical for Russian cultural centers and were virtually not adapted at all to the proclaimed theme of the event. From the researcher's diary:

> "The MC walked on stage and solemnly announced: 'Today, we open our creative season. And this means that it is time to talk about those people who couldn't imagine their lives without creativity and give it back to all of you. They are the heroes of any festive celebration: the creative teams at our cultural center. Let me introduce the largest and most famous folk group of our city—the Firebird Choreographic Ensemble!' Taking advantage of the pause between numbers, I looked around, trying to make out individual audience in the darkness of the auditorium. The overwhelming majority were retirees. Several young women—probably mothers of children involved in the concert. Several middle-aged women who looked like school teachers or cultural officials. They were most likely there on a professional basis.
>
> After Firebird came several more musical groups: Tremble, The Singing Birch Trees, the Allegro Vocal and Instrumental Ensemble. The repertoire is either folk/Russian folk with appropriate costumes and video footage in the background (scenes from village life, pastoral views), or pop (popular Russian and Soviet songs with a backing track)."

The musical numbers did not contain a single hint of the war. The only direct mention of the "special military operation" was made by the host towards the end of the program, but it was not developed further:

> "MC: 'The event today has the tagline: We Don't Abandon Our Own. This concert, dedicated to the opening of the creative season, is for charity. All funds raised will be used to support our fellow countrymen taking part in the "special military operation." We invite to the stage the head of the Department of Culture, Tourism and Youth Policy of the Cheryomushkin Municipal Administration—Valentina Sergeevna Zubikova!" [ceremonial music plays].' Contrary to my expectations, even in Valentina Sergeevna's speech there was only one indirect reference to the war ('...I want to wish the most important things to these groups and their leaders: creative success,

> new dances, new songs, new compositions. I wish everyone health, health and more health! And a blue sky above their heads. Good luck, everyone!'). The concert ends with a children's performance with elements of breakdance, the children are no longer in traditional Russian folk costumes, but jeans and colorful t-shirts. The song 'Onward, Brave Youth.' MC: 'The creative season of 2023-2024 is declared officially open! Until next time, dear friends! This is just the beginning!' Everyone disperses, and on the way out the retirees exchange everyday news. Only two women linger at the photo stand—they discuss the mutual acquaintances they recognized from the pictures."

In total, our researcher attended five public events: a screening of the film 'The Witness,' an evening of cinema on the square, two of Father Konstantin's prayer services, and the 'We Don't Abandon Our Own" charity concert. No one showed up for the film screening, and the evening of cinema on the square did not take place at all. The concert, apart from its title, a photo stand, the loom for weaving camouflage nets, and a couple of phrases from the stage, did not reveal its military/patriotic character in any way and did not contain any references to the ongoing war. Only the prayer services truly corresponded to the proclaimed military theme, but they gathered a small circle of regular parishioners, a few people listening in from the teetotaler community, and the wives of the mobilized.

Although in the first months of the war, according to the testimony of our researcher's interlocutors, various pro-war public events were held in Cheryomushkin (funerals, farewells, patriotic concerts, etc.), over time, only the events held for entertainment remained. However, even those only retained a superficial element of their military theme, primarily in the title and announcements. Observation of these events demonstrates that some of them exist only on paper, others are not much different from the usual pre-war events, well recognized by residents of small Russian towns, and others, such as prayer services, are in extremely limited demand and essentially remain on the periphery of public life.

Let us return to our imaginary person who fell asleep on February 23, 2022, and woke up in Cheryomushkin in the fall of 2023. They would have to take great efforts to break free from this ignorance. The war is practically invisible in the urban landscape of Cheryomushkin; it is rarely talked about on the streets or in local groups on social networks, and in public events only the superficial veneer of a patriotic narrative remain. The feeling of the war being washed out of everyday life was succinctly summed up by one of the local residents of the city in a conversation with the researcher. According to her, if it were not for the periodic news about deaths and funerals, the war could be forgotten completely (ethnographic diary, Cheryomushkin, September 2023). But this wording hints at the fact that the war is not completely forgotten ("if it weren't for..."). In the next section, we will try to demonstrate that it is wrong to say the war has completely vanished from the everyday lives of Cheryomushkin residents.

3.1.3 The war in civilian life

Tonya and her role in the research trip

Our look behind the scenes of the everyday life of Cheryomushkin residents was possible thanks to our researcher's key interlocutor, her assistant and partner Tonya. Our researcher had known Tonya before her arrival in Cheryomushkin. Tonya is a young entrepreneur originally from Cheryomushkin. In the city, she owns a beauty salon called "Style," a business which she has successfully managed for the past few years. In addition, she is the manager of the previously mentioned Ulybka Cafe.

Tonya is a model member of society with high social status and extensive connections. Various Cheryomushkinites, from administrative workers and police officers to housewives and taxi drivers, all come to Ulybka for lunch or to celebrate birthdays, and sometimes just to chat and discuss local happenings. Since there aren't many jobs in the city, both the cafe and the beauty salon have an important social function. By local standards, both the cafe and the salon have a fairly large staff. They all have a stable income, and many are able to master a craft from square one and gain experience that broadens their future life prospects. In addition, older city dwellers know Tonya's parents, who have a good reputation in the city. Due to all of the above, as well as Tonya's personality—friendly, sensitive, sociable, simple and direct in her approach to a wide variety of people—Tonya enjoys universal respect throughout the city.

At the same time, Tonya has a "big city background." She received her degree in Moscow and has many friends in Ekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, and other big cities. Tonya keeps up-to-date on the top news stories and reads all the major independent media. In communication with others, Tonya generally does not hide her oppositionary and anti-war views, but at the same time does not impose them on anyone. She perfectly reads the unspoken conventions of communication, within which it is rather unacceptable to discuss "politics."

Tonya was privy to the idea of the study before it began and immediately expressed great interest in it. According to her, the perception of war in the city had previously been a subject of her own curiosity. Throughout the visit, our researcher enjoyed Tonya's constant support. In fact, Tonya acted as a partner, regularly working in tandem with our researcher. It was thanks to Tonya, her initiative and position in the local community, that the researcher gained access to material that would have been impossible to collect without being a "true resident" of the city.

We are not so much speaking about the formal interviews we conducted (although here, too, Tonya's friendship often worked as an "entrance ticket" to some places and by default inspired trust in the interlocutors), but about informal conversations "in a natural setting" with various of Tonya's acquaintances. Sometimes Tonya invited people to visit her, sometimes she and the researcher ended up visiting together (for example, a gathering at the home of one of the employees from the beauty salon). Tonya introduced the researcher as her friend. In all cases, people felt comfortable, since they completely trusted Tonya.

In various companies, war-related topics occasionally slipped out on their own, but more often Tonya carefully steered the conversation in the "right" direction (for example, by asking about the latest news at that time of Prigozhin's mutiny or by mentioning one of their mutual acquaintances who was sent to the front). Such delicate maneuvers launched discussions of war-related topics.

On the one hand, these discussions died down as easily as they began—as a rule, interlocutors changed the conversation quite quickly. It was clear that the war with Ukraine was not a topic for regular reflection and discussion for most residents of Cheryomushkin (which only confirmed Tonya's words that people were "tired of the war" and discussed it much less often than in the first half of 2022). On the other hand, those present always had something to say in connection with the war. In particular, some conversations developed without Tonya having to casually pose more pointed questions. In other words, unlike the causes and goals of the war, the effects that the residents of Cheryomushkin noticed on themselves and their loved ones truly did concern them.

Detailed diary field notes that the researcher made at the end of such conversations, and individual vivid phrases that she tried to jot down in the middle of conversations, as well as "educated opinions" from Tonya herself about what was happening and being discussed in the city, gave us the opportunity to at least partially reconstruct the level of everyday conversations and reflections of the residents of Cheryomushkin about the war.

Death, family, money and morality in a small town

In small-town Cheryomushkin with its closely knit community, it is difficult to completely ignore the war (even if you really want to). In percentage terms, not many residents of Cheryomushkin went to the front—according to calculations done by Tonya's friends, about 20 prisoners were taken to the war from the nearest colony, about 60 people were mobilized and about 20 more volunteered. However, every resident, if not directly, then through one degree of separation, knows people who have returned from the war, died in the war or were currently at the front. In a place where everyone knows each other, any news of death, being sent to the front or returning from the war is always recounted in full detail. Cheryomushkin knows no anonymity. Here, as is often the case in small towns, it is customary to constantly look at acquaintances and neighbors and discuss in detail "what is going on with who." Chat, gossip, rumors and "dirt-dishing" are an important part of the social order, into which war-related events are also embedded. But precisely what kind of news resonates with urban society?

What garners attention, in fact, is news of the death of known city residents. "From among my relatives, Vladik just died. Apparently he got blown to pieces. When was that? I think it started in April…no, he was blown up in March, and they only brought him home to be buried in June," shares Zhanna, a nurse at a local hospital (this and the quotes below come from conversations described in the ethnographic diary of the researcher). The death of a local, especially if they were well known and respected in the city, can in itself give rise to collective emotions and experiences. A striking example is the death of a mobilized school teacher who returned in a coffin seven days after being sent from Cheryomushkin, having died an absurd death after mishandling a projectile before ever having reached the front. The death of this young man, who, according to several interlocutors, "was adored by everyone" for his human qualities and love for children, was a city-wide tragedy. According to stories, people at the funeral cried from pity and a sense of injustice, refusing to believe what had happened.

In conversations, residents of Cheryomushkin express regret about all the death in general, especially the fact that very young people are being sent to war. "They just came back from

the [mandatory service in the] army!" exclaims Alyona the nail technician, for example. Her colleague Lyuda echoes her sentiments: "They're sending children to fight!" Such discussions provoke criticism of the war, in which the blame for who started it is assigned to the abstract "powers that be," who achieve their goals at the cost of the lives of ordinary people. "Those pedophiles are divvying up the land among themselves, for fuck's sake! And our boys are sent out to fucking die just because they can't share!" Lyuda succinctly sums up. This criticism, however, does not translate to criticism of the Russian government (although, it would seem, it was the government that decided to mobilize its citizens for war), and the question of the responsibility of specific individuals is not raised at all.

Attention is also drawn to the social consequences of death. For example, retiree Lyubov Vasilyevna, recalling the death of another young man whose body was not returned to Cheryomushkin ("He was a good boy, played the accordion. There was nothing to bury! A military boot, with the foot still inside!"), immediately switches from the personality of the deceased to a more general, meaningful family context: "His mother had one son, she raised him alone, without her husband. She had a husband, but they separated. And one son, already at the age of…If only he left a child. War is very scary, ladies!" The death of the young man entailed a violation of the norm—his elderly mother was left alone, without a husband or any offspring. From Lyubov Vasilyevna's point of view, this should not be: the young man died without fulfilling his social function ("if only he left a child!")—he did not create a family, abandoned his mother without care, leaving no replacement for himself.

War-related events in private life arouse genuine interest among locals and provoke moral judgments that show what is acceptable and what is not. One such case occurred with the widow of a deceased teacher. She used the state-allotted funeral expenses to buy herself an expensive car, and a month after her husband's death she was seen "dancing joyfully" (according to several city residents) at a disco. In addition, rumors began to circulate about her relationships with men. Her case was "analyzed" in the presence of the researcher by nurse Zhanna, who dropped in to visit Tonya. The friends discussed the widow's age, the age difference between her and her deceased husband, as well as her appearance, her last haircut, and the make of her car. Zhanna said that the widow was considered a "slut" and a "party girl." However, Zhanna had her own verdict about the woman: "What else can she do? She's just continuing to live her life, if all that is true."

A similar situation was discussed during a girls' get together at the home of one of the employees at Tonya's beauty salon. The conversation turned to a girl with the surname Petrova, who, according to rumors, was cheating on her husband who had gone to war. "There are just girls like this Petrova. She uses the money that comes from her husband to buy herself a sweet new ride. And she's cruising around town in it with her lover. And everyone knows about it! He'll come back from war and she'll be like a little bunny rabbit, hopping back and forth. And as soon as he leaves, she'll hop off to someone else, for fuck's sake!" said manicurist Alyona, indignantly. Unlike Zhanna, who drew a more positive conclusion about the widow, cutting her some slack ("What else can she do?"), Alyona speaks of Petrova's behavior with disdain and condemnation.

Aside from the ambiguous ethical judgments of these women's behavior, there is another common thread in these discussions: the interlocutors focus on the fact that both women received money and bought cars. For residents of the relatively poor Cheryomushkin, money and every-

thing connected with it (earnings, benefits, payments, new acquisitions) is no less exciting a topic than relationships and family (who is talking to whom, who is cheating on whom, who is married, who is divorced, who already has children, etc.). Unlike in large cities, questions of earnings and spending in Cheryomushkin are by no means private. If anyone buys a new car, renovates their apartment, or receives a high salary, the entire city knows about it. The war created a lot of this kind of "economic news" in Cheryomushkin.

People actively discuss war-related money: the specific sum given for military services, funeral expenses and social benefits. For example, while visiting Tonya, her classmates Artyom and Vitya recalled their mutual friends who went to war: "Mikhailov says: 'My salary is 180 thousand, I'm enjoying it.'" Nurse Zhanna shared with Tonya information that, according to her friend who returned from the war, they were getting "220 a month, all utilities, everything paid." And Tonya's friend Kolya, who himself spent several years in prison in his youth, told the following story of how his friend received a windfall: the girl entered into a correspondence marriage with a prisoner from one of the colonies while he was still in prison, from where he was soon recruited into the Wagner PMC and sent to war. "He fought for three months, he got fucking butchered. He was from an orphanage, so he immediately transferred everything he had to her. She received seven million. She took herself out on a three-day date!" Kolya concluded with a laugh. In addition to earning money, the residents of Cheryomushkin discuss purchases made with military money: cars or, for example, gold jewelry, which, according to Sveta, one of the guests at the girls' get-together, "is only worn by those who receive money from the 'special military operation.'"

Overall, when discussing military money, our interlocutors find these kinds of earnings uncouth, including from a moral standpoint. In their opinion, no amount of money is worth the life, health and integrity of the family, which is given special significance by female interlocutors. For example, Zhanna explains why her friend does not want to return to the war: "Well, he has a wife back home, it's time to have kids. There's no guarantee that he will come back later. Maybe he'll end up a wounded man, wetting himself on the battlefield. And who needs a man like that? His wife? I don't think so." During the conversation, it was important for Zhanna to formulate and emphasize her moral position: "I believe no life is worth any amount of money...Even if he dies and they hand out these payments, it won't do any fucking good—the person is already dead," she said. The other women at the girls' get-together came to a similar conclusion while discussing the war and money: "It's not worth it." Residents of Cheryomushkin seem to feel the need to say it out loud: life and family are more important than money.

In addition to the financial acquisitions, the residents of Cheryomushkin also discuss the large-scale war-related expenses that fall on the shoulders of soldiers and their families: body armor, equipment, machinery, gasoline, and other gear. The need to pay for such expenses further strengthens the city residents' resolve that such earnings are inappropriate. While answering Tonya's question about why her friend's husband refused to go to war despite the opportunity to earn money, Zhanna, the nurse we met before, said that it was still not a profitable venture: "They buy everything entirely at their own expense—spare parts, shoes." During a girls' get-together, Lyuda, one of the employees of the beauty salon, almost shouted: "I'll do you one better! I have a friend, when her son ended up participating in the special operation, she took out a loan of 100 thousand to make sure her child was fully equipped!" Another employee, Alyona, chimed in:

"We took out 180, 180! Just to buy all the uniform pieces!" Their colleague Lyuda, interrupting, exclaimed: "You know, the parents themselves are the ones buying this protective gear, these helmets, these fucking boots, fucking gloves, and all this other shit!" It is important to note that the speakers found the fact that these people had to spend money on uniforms was unfair, and this feeling sometimes transformed into critical statements addressed to the authorities. Thus, to the researcher's intentionally naive question about why ordinary people should have to pay for the war, addressed to girls' get-together participants Alyona and Lyuda, one of them responded with the following unambiguous statement: "You're asking me? Ask the government!"

Most often, our interlocutors start criticizing the war by sharing "insider" information from friends on the frontlines that doesn't correspond with the official, propagandistic version of the "special operation." Thus, thirty-year-old car service employee Vitya passionately explained to the others present at Tonya's: "What they say on TV is all bullshit! The guys who are fighting there now, they say that you shouldn't trust anyone. The fact that our Ministry of Defense reports that we have minimal losses is all bullshit. A lot of people die every day, on their side and on ours." In a small-town environment, where almost everyone has acquaintances who have directly come into contact with the war, retellings of such "first-hand" testimonies regularly circulate throughout the entire community.

For some Cheremushkin residents, the war cast the Ukrainian heritage of other locals in a different light. At one girl's get-together, those gathered began to discuss a local resident who moved to Cheryomushkin from Ukraine after the events of 2014. From the point of view of Alyona and Marina, people with a Ukrainian passport enjoy greater financial advantages: "Mortgage loans, there's all sorts of things she gets now. For them—here, please take it. And for us—we go and get diddly-squat." It is interesting that the women contrast Russians with the newly alienated Ukrainians exclusively on an economic level (and not a political or ethnic one). During her entire stay in Cheryomushkin, the researcher never heard anyone speak with disdain or suspicion about local residents with Ukrainian roots. Only the issue of money, understandably "close to the heart," caused interlocutors to single out their Ukrainian acquaintances as a separate group.

The topic of Ukraine was raised in a similar way among the male company of Vitya and Artyom when discussing the high cost of natural gas in Cheryomushkin. "Gas in Russia is a fucking rip off," Vitya said indignantly. "They'll supply the gas, but to bring it all the way to your home, it'll cost you two hundred," Artyom chimed in. "Although over there they've already had it for a while—shit, those guys over there at the front, they're saying 'Pipes! There are pipes running fucking everywhere in Ukraine!'" Vitya developed on the idea. "And in the villages," Artyom added, and Vitya agreed: "Yeah, and they run to the villages, carrying fucking gas! In Ukraine!" It was the unexpected economic difference in basic living conditions that caused genuine indignation in the young men, while the image of Ukrainians as "enemies" offered by the authorities was never employed.

And so the war periodically breaks into the mundane, everyday lives of Cheryomushkin residents and creates different pretenses for discussion. Due to the small, close-knit nature of the community, conversations circulate among the city and the information they contain becomes common knowledge. That said, there are a relatively limited number of topics that capture their attention: primarily death, money, family and relationships. In this way, the war is integrated into

the existing small-town social order, where it is customary to regularly discuss neighbors and acquaintances. Although war "adds fuel to the fire" of usual routine, provoking moral and critical assessments of the events under discussion, for the most part, people focus on familiar topics that interest and excite them outside the context of war.

Bloggers, men, AK-47s and poetry

As has already been mentioned, for the majority of Cheryomushkin residents, politics are a rare topic of conversation. Among her interlocutors, our researcher observed an entire arsenal of phrases for shutting down "sensitive" topics: "Let's close the issue of politics, I get enough of it from TV" ; "Enough, let's talk about anything but the war" ; "We're simple people, we don't know much about politics" and so forth. Of course, there are those in Cheryomushkin who differ from the majority in this respect. For example, there is Tonya's small circle of opposition-minded friends: Pasha, who is in the automobile business and often travels to Moscow, and Kolya, a charismatic character who spent a significant amount of his socialization time in a juvenile correctional facility.

The evening spent in their company was different from the other get-togethers that our researcher had attended. The guests raised political topics themselves and discussed them for most of the evening. Pasha, Kolya and Tonya exchanged opinions on the latest news and statements from various opposition bloggers. It was clear that they were interested and enjoyed arguing and joking with each other, indulging in criticism and recounting political and historical tales. For friends who do not question each other's positions and interests and share a common sphere of information, discussing politics is part of their regular experience and identity.

However, even those residents of Cheryomushkin for whom politics is primarily something that they "get enough of from TV" discuss the war differently depending on their individual and social experiences. For example, conversations held between women differ from those held between men, and conversations among the youth differ from those held in the company of an older crowd. The differences become especially noticeable when people switch from the level of discussing local news and generalized statements (for example, regrets that "children are being sent to fight") to the personal level, as if "trying on" the war for themselves.

The women our researcher met were primarily concerned with the problem of family integrity. For them, the war represents a specific threat: losing a husband or son. Thus, at a girl's get-together, Lyuda emotionally exclaimed, addressing her son (who did not take part in the get-together, but everyone present knew that he was considering the prospect of going to war): "People join the army to fight for money. There's no fucking way I'm sending you off to war for a few rubles!" Here, Alyona takes up the conversation, appealing to a imaginary partner, her "man": "Why the fuck would I need your money anyway? I'll earn those 20 thousand rubles myself and I'll know that I have everything I need and my family is healthy. I'll buy myself those earrings, and I'll have my man beside me. I would never send my man off to certain death!" The conversationalists show solidarity with each other as women, arguing with the supposed "male" logic, according to which war means easy money. "Are you just going for the money? What the fuck do you need it for?" Alyona again addressed the imaginary men, and Lyuda agreed with her: "They're just going for

the money. My child said: I'm going to join the special operation. I say: You'll do no such fucking thing. I'd sooner lay my own life down, you're not going anywhere." Alyona continues, this time in a mocking "male" voice: "'I'll make more over there. I'd rather earn 200 thousand there than toil away at the sawmill.' [responding to him] Better for you to work at the sawmill!"

At Tony's, nurse Zhanna discussed the war not only in light of the prospect of losing loved ones, but also from a professional point of view. She admitted that she would be "interested" in going to work as a nurse at the front: "Just imagine, I'm there alone, and I have the choice to save a person, and I'm doing it all on my own!" However, Zhanna also made it clear that her main priority is her family: "I think I would go if I didn't have a family."

During a similar get-together, but in male company, Vitya, Artyom and Lyosha were not as interested in the topic of family, but actively discussed the "technical side" of the war: weapons, transport, uniforms, camp arrangement, as well as particularly exciting—from their point of view—episodes of combat violence. The young men exchanged impressions about the content of documentary videos from the front, which they periodically watch. They passionately argued about "grenades," "AK-47s" and "machine-gun turrets." It seemed that the war, which the young people know about from short videos and stories told by acquaintances, is for them something like an interesting TV series with emphatically "male" attributes (weapons, cars, gunfire).

Another example of how war is discussed differently by people with different social experiences is a conversation with Tonya's older friend Lyubov Vasilyevna, a retiree who worked at the cultural center for many years. Like other female interlocutors, she experienced the war as a threat to the family: "Now, I don't know where—so many have been killed already—where are the Ukrainian girls supposed to find husbands? Where will they find men to marry if they have all been killed?" During the conversation, she also complained that the young man from Cheryomushkin who died did not have time to "leave behind a child" (we have already written about this above). For Lyubov Vasilyevna, the integrity of the family is such a significant issue that, when discussing this topic, even disagreements with an enemy country temporarily lose their importance for her. In the first of the above quotes, she expresses sympathy for the Ukrainians despite the fact that she generally justifies the war and considers Ukraine to be the "enemy." Propaganda explanations of the war on TV immediately fade into the background when the conversation turns to what really concerns her.

Moreover, Lyubov Vasilyevna perceives the war through her Soviet upbringing and experience of cultural work. For her, "the war" is, first and foremost, refers to World War II. And she is primarily concerned with it as a subject in art, a theme with which, due to her interests and professional activities in the Executive Committee of the Department of Culture, she has worked all her adult life (she is still regularly invited to various city events to give speeches and read poems about WWII or the war in Afghanistan). During a conversation with Tonya and our researcher, Lyubov Vasilyevna, inspired by memories of her Soviet youth and the general passion for creativity, decided to read the girls Konstantin Simonov's poem, "Open Letter." This poem describes the story of a woman who decided not to wait for her husband to return from the war and to leave him for another. Before reading it, Lyubov Vasilyevna exclaimed: "And this poem is still relevant! There is a war going on now, so it is still relevant." And after reading it, she added: "That was 1943, I think. And now there is a war in Ukraine. Girls, wives—wait! Don't act like greedy pigs,

making him send money back to you while you are here. In Soviet times, they kept track of your moral standing." Lyubov Vasilyevna is primarily interested in the poem itself and the opportunity to share it. She uses the war with Ukraine as an "illustration," allowing her to make the content of the poem relevant to the "younger generation." In other words, the fact that there is a "new" war seems to come in handy and adds poignancy to the poem; it is not the poem that becomes a commentary on the war, but the opposite. Despite the fact that the connection between WWII and the special operation is part of modern Russian propaganda, our interlocutor constructs it in a completely different way: she is not interested in "fighting the fascists," "defending the Motherland" or "supporting the front from the backlines." Lyubov Vasilyevna's genuine emotions, due to her personal interests and professional history, are evoked by Soviet war poetry and the theme of marital fidelity.

***

According to our researcher's observations and her interlocutors' accounts, people in Cheryomushkin have "grown weary of the war." There are practically no visible traces of the war remaining in the urban landscape and residents have begun to discuss it less frequently, both online and in person. Institutional support for the war has noticeably died down: public events on this topic are either only held on paper and do not attract broad public attention, or retain only a formal shell of their original intent, losing their military-patriotic content and dissolving into familiar, decades-tested formats with minimal hints of the current political context. Rare exceptions in the form of ideologically charged spaces like churches are in demand among a limited circle of regular parishioners.

At the same time, it is impossible to completely forget the war in a small-town environment. News of deaths and of acquaintances being sent to the front immediately becomes public knowledge and creates resonance. The death of local residents, of course, evokes collective emotion. The war also affects familiar and understandable spheres of life: family relationships and earnings. The events affecting daily life created by the war—from deaths and love affairs to news of salaries, purchases and expenses—challenge the usual routine and force city dwellers to evaluate them from a moral point of view and reaffirm the current social norms.

Cheryomushkinites are interested in different aspects of the war, depending on their individual and social experiences. Only for a small circle of opposition-minded people do political and media events become an object of attention and serve as a topic of regular discussion, while most residents try to avoid talking about politics. Women view the war as a threat to the integrity of the family, namely the health and lives of husbands and sons. Young men, whose friends share news from the front lines with them, show more curiosity about the "inner workings" of the war: videos of gunfire, types of weapons, transport, provisions, and so on. Older people, who bear a certain "Soviet" cultural mindset, may think about the current war through the lens of a static set of snapshots from WWII.

In one way or another, Cheryomushkinites express their emotions and complaints about the war. People are upset that young men are being sent to their deaths and are also outraged by the fact that they are required to buy their own uniforms, weapons, food and clothing. In general,

everyone is willing to stand behind the fact that the war is "bad" and "scary"; some interlocutors in particular stated that they didn't understand the point of the war. Finally, most of our interlocutors agreed that people go to war with Ukraine either out of necessity (if they were drafted), or to earn money, or because their life is bad (for example, if they failed to achieve anything, start a family, etc.). Such criticism, however, does not make people doubt the necessity and inevitability of war and does not entail criticism of the Russian government. In response to uncomfortable questions about the "political" meaning of the war, most interlocutors rhetorically defend themselves with the help of various clichés offered by propaganda (which, tellingly, they do not use when they discuss problems that are truly relatable and close to their hearts). This topic will be analyzed in detail in the second part of the report.

3.2 Chapter 2. The Republic of Buryatia: "All my friends are off fighting"

3.2.1 Introduction: The Republic of Buryatia, Ulan-Ude and Udurgh Village

The Republic of Buryatia is bordered by the Republic of Tyva, the Irkutsk Oblast, Zabaikalsky Krai and Mongolia. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious region with a population of almost a million. Three popular religions coexist here: Russian Orthodoxy, Buddhism and Shamanism. And although the latter are traditionally Buryat belief systems, the Russian population of the region also pays visits to lamas and shamans.

The region lost part of its territory and Buryat population as a result of the 2008 consolidation policy, when the Ust-Orda and Agin-Buryat Autonomous Districts, previously part of the republic, were annexed by the Irkutsk and Chita Oblasts, respectively (the Chita region was later renamed Zabaikalsky Krai). Currently, about a third of the Buryats live outside the Republic of Buryatia, and the republic's indigenous ethnic communities—the Buryats (30.61%), Evenks (less than 1%), and Soyots (less than 1%)—are smaller in number than the population identifying as Russian (59.45%). In 2017, Buryat and other minority languages ceased to be a mandatory subject in schools.

Due to its location on the Russian border, the region has a large number of military units: there are several Eastern Military District brigades permanently deployed in the territory. The number of ethnic Buryats in the Russian army is significantly greater than their overall percentage in the Russian population: they make up 0.6% of the military and only 0.34% of the population.

Buryatia is a small region in terms of size and population, with strong horizontal connections. The strength of family ties and pressure from the immediate environment were important factors in the decision to leave or return to the region after the start of partial mobilization. Strong horizontal ties also make participating in any protests riskier, local activists say, because the consequences can affect not only the immediate participants but also their families. So even those who have left the region are often afraid to criticize the Russian government.

Finally, Buryatia is among the regions that has suffered the most in relation to the war. The overall percentage of dead residents of this republic is much greater than their share in the country's population, and during the partial mobilization, residents of Buryatia were drafted two and a half to three times more often, and are seven times more likely to die than residents of other regions.

Our ethnographic study of the Republic of Buryatia lasted a little over a month. During this time, our researcher conducted participant observation and talked to residents of the republic in the regional capital Ulan-Ude (about 435,000 people) and in the village of Udurgh (less than 10,000 people).

Ulan-Ude is the third-largest city in the Far Eastern Federal District. Surrounding Ulan-Ude, a huge suburban area stretches out for many kilometers following a period of uncontrolled growth over the last decade and a half. About half of the entire population of Buryatia is concentrated in its capital. According to pre-war research, the number of migrants from villages and small towns to the regional capital has grown rapidly over the past ten years, leading to the expansion of the private sector in Ulan-Ude and the deterioration of the city's ecology, in particular smog

throughout the cold season due to wood and coal heating. Ulan-Ude is traditionally not only an industrial but also a commercial city.

Udurgh Village is popular with tourists, especially in summer and early autumn. There are no large industrial enterprises near Udurgh, and economic production is limited to livestock farming and wood processing. The village has several supermarkets (regional giants), local electronics and household goods stores, pharmacies, many cafes, beauty salons, hotels, a Wildberries pick-up point, as well as many public cultural institutions: a library, a cultural center, a gym, and a supplementary education center for children. Many local institutions, both public and commercial, enjoy additional support from the state: they receive federal grants and participate in the “My Business” small and medium-sized business support program.

Ethnic, local and national identity

Before the announcement of the mobilization, and even before February 2022, The presence of Buryat soldiers on Ukrainian territory was a hotly debated topic in Russian opposition media and abroad. A common thread throughout these discussions was an anti-colonialist perspective, according to which the dominant Russian population, led by Moscow, uses members of national minorities, in particular the Buryats, as expendable resources. However, our researcher, despite growing up in a national republic herself and belonging to a national minority—that is, this was an especially sensitive topic for her—noted practically none of this sentiment in conversations with local residents of Buryatia. Even interlocutors with anti-war and relatively oppositional views did not bring the topic up themselves without being asked leading questions about national discrimination. From time to time, Buryat interlocutors over 30 expressed regret that the Buryat language and culture are gradually being forgotten and that children increasingly do not know the language. At the same time, our researcher, comparing what she saw with her experience of growing up in another national republic, was surprised by the prevalence of Buryat words among teenagers and young people: for young residents of the republic, knowing the language and being interested in Buryat traditions is something “fashionable,” respectable. One of our researcher’s interlocutors from Ulan-Ude noted a surge of interest in everything Buryat within the republic, linking this, among other things, to the attention of the world community to Buryatia after the start of the war. It is important to note, however, that not being Buryat herself, even despite belonging to a national minority, our researcher might not have found herself in environments in which Buryat ethnic identity could be more politicized.

Buryatia can be classified as a region with a pronounced state identity: this means that people associate themselves with the state more strongly than with any other group, believe that the state represents their interests, and believe that it should govern their collective life. More than once during her stay in Buryatia, our researcher noted expressions of loyalty to state structures, such as schools, universities or local government. It can be assumed that several factors played an important role in maintaining this loyalty to the Russian state. The Buryats were a ”model minority” in the USSR: the level of mainstream education integrated in the republic was one of the highest. The flip side of this has been the decline of Buryat culture and language, while loyalty to the Kremlin and the Russian state apparatus has become one of the most important components of regional and

ethnic identity. Due to the economic situation, which limits career opportunities, strengthening the presence of the public sector (including the army), the state also turns out to be one of the most important players, providing stability and an income, albeit humble, to the region's residents.

Our data do not allow us to make assumptions about differences in the perception of the war between representatives of the two main ethnic groups—Russians and Buryats. The findings and observations described below concern all residents of the region, regardless of their ethnicity. In order to preserve information about the ethnicity of interlocutors, we took their ethnicity into consideration when replacing their names with pseudonyms.

War and the economic situation

With the appearance of the first investigations into the percentages of those being called to war from different regions, it was discovered that Buryatia (along with Dagestan, Kaliningrad Oblast and Krasnoyarsk Krai) was the leader in the number of mobilized citizens in 2022. In terms of the number of deaths (data for April 2024), the Republic of Buryatia is also in the top five. Important Stories, together with the Conflict Intelligence Team, identified a statistically significant negative relationship between per capita income and the number of mobilized soldiers by region (the lower the income, the more mobilized). Buryatia clearly illustrates this trend: the republic is in the bottom third in terms of per capita income and is among the top ten regions in terms of the number of people with incomes below the poverty line.

Among other things, over the past decade, Buryatia has been among the Russian regions with the highest degree of unemployment. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the level of registered unemployed people in Buryatia decreased even compared to pre-COVID times: from 9.2% in 2019 to 5.3% in 2023. However, Buryatia still remains among the leaders in unemployment in the Far Eastern Federal District: on average, it takes more than seven months for residents of the republic who are actively looking for work to find a job.

Industry is the leading sector of Buryatia's economy, bringing in a third of tax revenues to the budget. But if you look at the dynamics of registered employment, the number of people employed in the manufacturing and extractive industries is decreasing, while, for example, the number of people working in wholesale and retail trade, in public administration and military security, as well as the construction, hotel and restaurant businesses is growing. This trend was already evident before the war—the majority of officially employed people were in the public sector, electric power and trade industries.

During her first days in the region, our researcher was unpleasantly surprised by grocery prices in local markets. Despite the low incomes, subsidized regional budget and high level of unemployment, the prices here were comparable to those in the capital, and occasionally even exceeded them. At first, she assumed that this could somehow be related to the war, but then, after conversing with residents of Ulan-Ude, determined that high prices had been an issue since long before 2022.

According to pre-war rankings of the Russian regions, the Republic of Buryatia has been solidly near the bottom of the list in terms of socio-economic indicators and the financial well-

being of the population. One of our researcher's interlocutors admitted that he hadn't met a single person living in the republic who didn't have a line of credit.

Residents of Buryatia also find salvation in having children and receiving child care benefits, which have begun to exceed salaries in recent years. One of the residents of Udurgh, a 30-year-old female education worker, says in an interview: "We [at the multipurpose center] had a vacancy and, upon hearing about the salary, many said: 'I'd rather receive [child care] benefits.' Because the salary there is 23 thousand, and you receive about 40 in benefits—the choice is obvious."

Despite high unemployment, residents of the republic and researchers who visited the region before the war noted the personnel shortage in the region due to the low salaries. Another reason for the personnel shortage is the stable outflux of migrants from Buryatia, which began long before February 2022. Due to low salaries and the lack of suitable work, many are forced to leave and/or receive professional retraining. A 43-year-old male doctor from Ulan-Ude explains:

> "We have the tendency—if we're talking about men, the majority of the male population works on a rotational or seasonal basis. That is, people who have a fairly good education, higher education, still have to go somewhere else to work and earn money."

The mobilization only increased migration from the region. However, among those who fled mobilization, according to interlocutors, there are many who returned, having failed to successfully settle in other countries or regions of Russia. The Asian route (South Korea, Mongolia, Thailand, China) was popular among those leaving Buryatia even before 2022, and mobilization did not change this. Less often, interlocutors talked about acquaintances who had left for the USA, Georgia and Israel.

In 2018, the Republic of Buryatia and Zabaikalsky Krai were excluded from the Siberian Federal District by presidential decree and transferred to the Far Eastern Federal District. One of the consequences of this was that the republic began to offer preferential mortgages for those in the Far Eastern regions. The excitement around the housing market, as well as the rise in prices for building materials during the pandemic, provoked an unprecedented increase in prices for apartments and houses. Subsequently, even with the terms of the preferential mortgages, many people found it unprofitable to buy apartments in Ulan-Ude, which increased migration from the republic to other regions and large Siberian cities.

Thus, in many ways, the war reinforced trends that already existed in the region, and these, in turn, contributed to the perception of the war: low wages, high prices, including for housing, the customary attitude towards seasonal work for men, and a large number of available workers created favorable conditions for mobilization to be perceived as an alternative opportunity for high-paying employment. A strong regional identity, subordinated to the state identity, and strong horizontal ties also contributed to how the republic's residents responded to the war. We will show how this affected the perception of the war in the following sections.

3.2.2 War in the public sphere

The urban landscape in the face of the war

While our researcher was traveling on the train between Moscow and Ulan-Ude, she regularly heard her seatmates talking about the war. That is why the lack of discussion about the war in public places in Buryatia immediately roused her attention. During her entire stay in the republic, our researcher did not hear a single discussion about the war with Ukraine on the streets, in stores, cafes, or other such public spaces.

Pro-war symbols were also rare both in the city and in the village. In the center of Ulan-Ude, on the famous monument popularly known as ”Lenin’s Head,” there was a huge letter V, and on one of the buildings near the central square hung a banner with the slogan: “Buryatia Za PraVdu / #Svoikhnebrosaem” (In English: WeDontAbandonOurOwn). These were the only pro-war symbols noticed by our researcher. According to local residents, in the first days of the war, the letter Z appeared on “Lenin’s Head,” which was soon torn off by an unknown person. One of our researcher’s interlocutors, who was familiar with local administrative workers, suggested that the letter Z was taken down by regional patriots, allegedly because Z is the symbol of the Western Military District, and V is the symbol of their own, the Eastern Military District. Soon Lenin’s head was once again adorned, this time with the letter V. Unlike Cheryomushkin in the Sverdlovsk Oblast (see section 1.1.1), advertisements for contract service in the army were often seen papering the streets of both Ulan-Ude and Udurgh, which is far from the capital. In addition, in Ulan-Ude, our researcher periodically noticed men with Z-patches on their clothes, pro-war stickers on cars, Russian flags on residential buildings, and St. George ribbons on the bags of passersby. The public space of the village seemed sterile compared to the city—there, the only reminder of the war was the advertisements for contract service. The researcher did not notice any anti-war symbols in the public space either in Ulan-Ude or in Udurgh.

While in Buryatia, our researcher followed several regional Telegram news channels. In one of them, which seemed the most neutral (not pro-government, but also not oppositional) and was popular among residents, subscribers discussed the news in unmoderated comments. However, despite the fact that the channel contained both anti- and pro-war comments, these comments, with rare exceptions, did not attract the attention of the audience and did not provoke discussion. It seemed that the war did not arouse much interest among the residents of the republic.

Public events and the war

Our researcher actively searched for official events dedicated to the war in one way or another, but, as in other regions, finding events that fit this description was not so easy. Her interlocutors also could not remember any war-related events in recent times. According to their observations, everyone around was tired of the war and did not want to participate in events that would remind them of it. Moreover, over time, residents of the republic began to demand events that would allow them to forget about their problems for a while and take their minds off things. Thus, the 60-year-old female director of the community center in Udurgh Village told our researcher that at

the beginning of the war, both artists and spectators stopped participating in cultural activities for a while, but gradually cultural life in the village resumed:

> "We were afraid [that people would stop coming to events at the cultural center], but they didn't stop coming, no. On the contrary, I can safely say we became more united. People come, **they don't want to think about the bad, they come to relax**."

In the capital city of Ulan-Ude, our researcher managed to find several events directly or indirectly related to the war. One of the first she attended was a public farewell for a soldier. The farewell was organized by a group of young city musicians for their comrade, but anyone could buy a ticket to this "creative event." Once there—the event was held at a recording studio in the city center—the researcher began to carefully listen to the conversations that were starting up among those gathered. Here, there must be people discussing the war!—or so it seemed to her. But this was not the case. The atmosphere was festive: those gathered played games, danced and made toasts praising the character of Baatar, the hero of the occasion, with wishes that he continued to grow and become even better in the future. A few hours later, the researcher felt like she was at a birthday party, not a send-off for someone going into the army during a war: the participants looked cheerful and carefree, as if they had forgotten about the serious reason behind the gathering. Only after talking to him one-on-one did she learn that he did not share the general enthusiasm. She wrote in her diary:

> "I asked him if he wanted to join the army. He replied that everyone in his family was a military man and that all his older brothers were currently fighting in Ukraine. And although he didn't say it directly, I got the sense that he didn't really have a choice. 'I really did want to go before, but the closer I got to the service date, the less I wanted to go,' Baatar admitted."

At the same time, from a similarly private conversation with Baatar's girlfriend, the researcher learned that he was seriously considering the possibility of signing a contract and going to war. The girl admitted to the researcher that she was very worried about her boyfriend and was trying to dissuade him from this decision. Other participants in the event, including Baatar's close friends, who were likely privy to his plans, did not discuss this with the researcher or among themselves.

By continuing to communicate regularly with the group after the event, the researcher was able to understand that most of Baatar's friends were against the war. But they avoided talking and thinking about this "heavy" and "depressing" topic, preferring to make non-political art. Just before wrapping up the party, the war in Ukraine was publicly mentioned for the first—and last—time, after everyone had had a few drinks. "What a great song!" said Zhalma. "It's called 'Amara,' which literally means 'take a rest'. At the end they sing: 'Who needs war? No one, of course!'"

The second event our researcher attended in Ulan-Ude was called "Father's Day" and was dedicated to men who lost their sons in the war. The event consisted of three parts: the opening of the photo exhibition "Father of a Hero" (staged photo portraits of fathers with their dead sons' favorite things), a festive concert during which fathers of dead soldiers were presented with certificates by the head of the republic, and a tea party. The event was organized by the Buryat branch of the

”Defenders of the Fatherland” foundation. About 150 people gathered in the hall—more than the organizers had expected.

The event opened with ceremonial speeches. The host explained the meaning behind the event to those present, and then handed the floor over to representatives of the foundation, several regional officials and cultural figures. They all spoke about the importance of service to the homeland and a patriotic education. In conclusion, the host said:

> “Fathers are protectors, fathers are breadwinners, fathers are our first advisors on a variety of issues. From childhood, they help us learn about the world around us, master skills. <...> Their actions, their deeds, their contribution to the common cause are an important part of the achievements of our republic, which make our country stronger and richer!”

Then she invited the guests of honor onto the stage: fathers whose sons had received the title of “hero” posthumously. One by one, fifteen people silently walked across the stage and collected their awards to the sound of the audience’s applause. Some of the audience members began to sob. A few more ceremonial speeches from the officials and then the host announced the opening of the photo exhibition. The lights went out in the hall and slides with portraits of the fathers began to flash on the screen, accompanied by a song:

> “You are still alive
> and always in my heart
> You are still alive
> though fate tore us apart
> You are still alive, with angels flying high,
> you’ll never die.”

The sobs in the hall grew louder.

The rest of the concert, unexpectedly, consisted of the amateur creative numbers already well known to patrons of Russian cultural centers. Local pop singers, a quasi-folklore Cossack ensemble, a young finalist of a television vocal competition, demobilized soldiers and even city social workers performed on stage. The concert was followed by a tea party, to which all guests were invited. The simplicity and warmth of the tea party and concert contrasted with the official language of glorification of the dead and their fathers, which was used by the hosts and officials speaking from the stage.

The researcher could not shake off the feeling of the strange, seemingly unnatural combination of personal tragedy experienced by the families of the victims and the bureaucratic language of the event’s organizers, who spoke of patriotic education, duty, leaving a legacy for posterity, and the president’s orders. She wrote in her ethnographic diary:

> “I couldn’t get away from the association of a wake at a funeral. However, the people around me didn’t seem to perceive it as a wake. Without knowing the situation or context, I would have thought that I was at some kind of luncheon at a museum.

> People were smiling, making small talk. Volunteers were pouring tea for everyone. I ate a couple of cheese sandwiches and headed towards the dressing rooms. In the foyer, at the information desk, I picked up a brochure for joining the military."

Unlike the capital of the region, Udurgh Village did not give our researcher any ethnographic payloads in the form of military-themed events. During the two weeks that she spent in the village, many public events took place—a festival of children's plays, a dictation in the Buryat language, an athletic competition, creative panels with local poets, and so on—but none of them (with the exception—but only partially—of the competition) touched on either military or patriotic issues. As the head of the local cultural center admitted in an interview, "We get an order from above saying that we have to organize some event, and we do hold events of a certain nature." But then she added: "And so we try to somehow neutralize this tension a little. If you think about it all the time...and people's brothers, sisters, and fathers are there. [And so] you have to think about it all the time already, [and] also from the stage?"

In the local supplementary education center, the researcher found children's drawings on the wall of one of the classrooms, dedicated to the "special military operation." The teachers, not without pride, explained to the researcher that they had very active children who took part in various patriotic competitions and activities. A little later, the researcher herself managed to catch local schoolchildren at one of the "patriotic activities," net weaving, which was held in the village church. It soon became clear, however, that the teacher had brought them to the church, and the children looked bored. It looked as if they all wanted to get home as soon as possible. The researcher shared this observation with Megren, her key interlocutor, one of the teachers at the same supplementary education center. It turned out that Megren had asked "her children" about their attitude toward the war and found out that they "all had a negative attitude."

In mid-October 2023, pro-Kremlin media in the Republic of Buryatia broadcast a report that went viral under the slogan "Buryats don't run." Regional media drew attention to Vladimir Putin's brief comments to a journalist after meeting with soldiers from Buryatia in late September of that year. According to the president, he was surprised and touched when, after expressing his gratitude to a "Russian by nationality" Buryat soldier for his steadfastness in battle, the soldier modestly stated: "Buryats don't run." During her ethnographic expedition to Buryatia, our researcher repeatedly encountered references to this story in conversations with residents of the republic. The references were made both in connection with the topic of war and without connection to the war. This story has become a kind of "calling card" of the region.

Local officials also began to use the rhetorical phrase "Buryats do not run" in public speeches, even outside the context of the special operation. For example, in Udurgh, our researcher attended an athletic competition in which teams from various budgetary organizations of the district took part. Nothing there was reminiscent of the war, and the event itself did not promote militarism—just a healthy lifestyle. At the opening of the competition, three officials gave motivational speeches: the deputy head of the village administration, the deputy chairman of the People's Khural of the Republic of Buryatia (the parliament of the republic) and the Deputy Chairman of the People's Khural of the Republic of Buryatia Committee on State Structure, Local Self-Government and Civil Service Issues. The first two spoke about the value of a healthy lifestyle,

friendship and mutual assistance, and about how proud they were of the village for participating in athletic activities, while the third gave the most politicized speech:

> "I'm very pleased that I have been lucky enough to work in the [district name] education department for the past two years. I know my fellow countrymen, I know what active, purposeful, smart, and decent people they are—my fellow countrymen. I travel all over the republic and I always see that here we have...the Buryat perspective is so uplifting, yes. You've heard that **Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin said, on the central TV station, 'Buryats don't run.'** And this very word "Buryats do not run" speaks about our nation, regardless of whether we are Russian, we are Buryats, we are Tatars, you know, this is the relationship that has been created within us between our peoples who live in the Republic of Buryatia. **We, the Buryats, are not running anywhere, we are not going back**. And today, with the same goal, I want to say that **we need to move forward, achieve victory, always strive for something better!** And I want you to speak your native language. [speaks Buryat] I go to school, go into stores, I say: '[speaks Buryat].' And let's just talk among ourselves, at home, like people, we will [speaks Buryat] speak. Today I was at a secondary school. And it made me happy to hear the children. I say: 'Sagaalganom!' They responded in chorus: 'Sa-gaal-ganom!'"

It is significant that, in citing a slogan that arose in connection with the war, the official transferred it to a non-war context, applying it to the everyday life of his fellow countrymen and to the discussions about national identity that are relevant for the republic. All three officials received equal portions of polite applause from the competition participants and the fans present.

So, the events that our researcher attended and in which the topic of war and/or patriotism came up have one thing in common: they all seem familiar and relatable to any Russian, and there is nothing unusual or extraordinary about them. In one case (the "farewell to the army") the participants themselves avoided the topic of war and followed the format of an ordinary celebration (hence the event's striking similarity to a birthday). In the second case (the "Father's Day" event), officials tried to shift the emphasis from grief over an extraordinary loss (one which occurred in wartime conditions) to the everyday heroism of the fathers of fallen soldiers. In the third case (the athletic competition), the famous slogan born of the war was cleared of its military content and applied to the everyday life of the Buryats—in reality, infinitely far from the issues of Russia's foreign policy.

Military volunteering: "Even if not for my son, then at least for someone"

There are no statistics on the prevalence of military volunteering in the Republic of Buryatia (or in other Russian regions). However, most of our interlocutors said that either they or their relatives help the Russian army in one way or another: they send money, buy the necessary equipment or make it themselves in volunteer centers. Our researcher managed to conduct participant observation within two volunteer initiatives: she visited a volunteer center in Ulan-Ude for a week, and attended a volunteer group in Udurgh Village for three days. Both initiatives made products to fill the army's needs on a voluntary basis: they wove camouflage nets and sewed bulletproof vests, pouches, and stretchers. They sent their handmade products through other organizations and acquaintances to military units or distributed them to local residents who were going to the front. To do the latter, they had to fill out an application and stand in line.

The founder of a volunteer center in Ulan-Ude said that she began volunteering because she wanted to somehow help her relatives and friends who found themselves in the combat zone. Other city residents immediately joined her, bringing their personal belongings—wedding dresses, curtains or extra tulle—to use for weaving nets. After some time, they established net weaving in the village as a volunteer activity for everyone. Both initiatives are embedded in the dense fabric of social relations: kindergartens and cafes give them iron cans for trench candles, entrepreneurs and the administration collect money and buy the necessary materials, while ordinary citizens come and participate in the actual production process.

What makes residents of the republic, most of whom have no volunteer experience in the past, start participating in such initiatives? Firstly, volunteer work gives them the opportunity to feel at least some control over what is happening. Without being able to bring back their family members or stop the war, people feel that they are doing at least something, no matter how paradoxical it may sound to an outside observer. One volunteer at the volunteer center in Ulan-Ude, Inga, told our researcher that a friend of hers advised her to join. She came to her friend in tears after a difficult day: her husband had not returned from the front, and then she'd had an argument with an instructor at a driving school. "Why are you crying? Are you working right now?" her friend asked her, and Inga replied that she was not working. "There's this place nearby you...go weave nets," her friend recommended. So Inga came to volunteer and really did feel better.

Secondly, many people enjoy being part of a community that, in the eyes of the majority, does something useful and important, "helps others." According to our researcher's observations, the atmosphere at both volunteer centers was radically different from the surrounding environment: against the backdrop of general apathy and depression, the volunteers seemed active, optimistic, and self-organized. Finally, it can be assumed that one important reason for the popularity of volunteer initiatives in Buryatia is the strong sense of local identity (we are Buryats) and the idea, shared by many people, that helping the community is necessary and important.

At the same time, residents of Buryatia participate in various forms of support for the Russian army not because they support the war. First and foremost, they want to help "their own kind," residents of the republic, regardless of their ethnicity. The kinds of people considered "their kind" has gradually expanded over the past two years: from specific people, relatives and acquaintances, to residents of the same village or city, and then to residents of the republic as a whole. During a

conversation with a researcher, a lama in Udurgh Village shared his observation: at the beginning of the war, he saw volunteers who were eager to help their loved ones; now he often sees these women say: “Even if it’s not my son, let it go to help someone else.”

The volunteers themselves expect people with family members in the combat zone to actively participate in volunteer initiatives aimed at helping the army. Saina, a volunteer from Ulan-Ude, shared the following story with our researcher: once a woman came to the volunteer center and began to beg for camouflage nets because “her soldier” was flying off to the front the next day. Saina explained to the woman that she could not fulfill this request—there were many people who wanted nets, and she would have had to sign up to be on the waiting list in advance. In response, the woman began to cry. “Why are you crying?” Saina was indignant. “Why don’t you come and weave these nets yourself? We will give you the material, we will give you the nets—please, weave. We don’t have enough hands. For God’s sake, call all your relatives and weave if your fighter needs a camouflage net.” After telling this story, Saina looked at the other volunteers present, seeking their support. And she got it. “Listen, if I had someone over there, I’d probably be sitting at this loom for days,” said Alina, her partner. So, after starting off by helping their loved ones, the volunteers not only expanded their activities to help all residents of the republic who found themselves in the war zone, but also began to expect similar participation from others.

At the same time, the political component of the war is of little concern to the volunteers (or they prefer not to discuss it while working). They constantly chat while sewing or weaving nets, but they hardly discuss the news, and news of the war even less so. The rare conversations about politics concern what is happening in western countries, for example, changes in the dollar exchange rate or the impact of the situation in the United States and Europe on support for Ukraine. When some of the volunteers from the center in Ulan-Ude went to drink tea in the next room, the researcher heard snatches of their conversation. ”Here, in the American Constitution, it is written: ‘Russia is enemy number one,’ ‘As soon as we capture Russia, we will destroy everyone, and China is next in line.’ They do not just want to bring us to our knees, but to destroy us,” Katerina complained loudly and indignantly. ”Uh-huh,” Inna confirmed, ”There’s no way they’ll succeed!”

The topic of the war with Ukraine may arise in volunteers’ conversations from time to time in the form of short slogan-like remarks, but these remarks almost never lead to responses or discussions. Here is how our researcher describes one such situation in her diary:

> “When the third stretcher was assembled, Inna, satisfied, exclaimed: “Who’s great? We’re great! Such pros!” And a minute later, out of the blue, she blurted out: ‘Stinking Ukrops [a derogatory term for “Ukrainians”]! We’ll show you no mercy!’ I was a little shocked, but didn’t show it, of course. Why say such a thing all of a sudden? We hadn’t discussed the Ukrainians at all, or the war in general, during the entire previous hour of working together. After that, Inna and I were called to take our lunch.”

Volunteers usually talked about things that related to their everyday lives: local prices, pensions, their families, their volunteer work. Our researcher never heard volunteers discuss, for instance, issues with the city or the republic.

Volunteers in Ulan-Ude are very proud of their independence and the non-profit nature of their center, often writing about it on social networks. Just as the fathers of fallen soldiers are involved in the feats of their children, volunteers feel involved in the heroism of the Buryats as a whole. From time to time, they throw phrases and slogans at each other like "Everything for the front! Everything for victory!"; "We have socialist competition here" [a form of competition between individuals practiced in the Soviet Union in order to make them produce more; Buryat volunteers use it as a metaphor for their work], and so on. Some of them also mentioned that their sons went to war themselves, without waiting to be drafted, thereby drawing a parallel between the volunteer heroism of their children and their own contribution to the victorious cause. Once, volunteers from Ulan-Ude asked our researcher why her friend (whom, according to her legend, the researcher had come to visit) did not come to the volunteer center. The researcher explained that, in her friend's opinion, providing for the front was the state's job. "She's not a patriot, right?" Varya said in response, surprised. "She doesn't know history well. Let her read about World War II, the Great Patriotic War. The back lines have always been united with the front!" Ochirma added.

Of course, only a minority of the republic's residents end up in volunteer centers helping the Russian army. Other forms of assistance are much more common: for example, collecting money for the army's needs or buying things that are then sent to military units. Sometimes participation in such collections is truly voluntary, and the motivation for it is a strong regional identity, a desire to help "their kind." Thus, Narana, a 32-year-old educator from a small village near Udurgh, explains in an interview:

> "Take me, for example—I have a classmate in the special operation, I send money to them. <...> We have a group in the village. **I donate to them because all my people are from the village**, a lot of our guys went over there [to the "special operation" zone]. A lot! **An awful lot of guys went there**. <...> And in my mind, I won't miss 500 rubles much, I donate that every month. I do it at the school. Well, it's, I don't know, a kind of charity, I guess…**At least I'll be providing some assistance, because I can't go there to fight, or something like that**."

Narana is primarily concerned about her loved ones—the young men from her village—and how her village is faring during the war.

Often, however, donating money to the army is not strictly voluntary: many donate because they are not prepared to go against the collective norm of helping "their kind." Once, Megren, our researcher's key interlocutor in Udurgh Village, who was privy to the details of the study, told her a story about her colleague. During a conversation with Megren, the woman had at first expressed indignation that her husband was being unfairly sent off to war, and then suddenly exclaimed: "I completely forgot to chip in for the donations for our people!" The researcher suggested in response that the residents of Udurgh were afraid of repression and therefore avoided critical statements about the war, but Megren confidently shot down this suggestion: "What repression in Udurgh!? No, everyone in the city is afraid, but here, there is the desire to be united with everyone else, not to fall from the majority, from the norm."

Finally, sometimes participation in such collections is "compulsory voluntary." The fact is that the collection of funds for military needs are carried out by both public enthusiasts and state organizations. Formally, donations are voluntary for their employees, but many, including opponents of the war, are afraid that refusing to participate might displease the administration or colleagues and may lead to consequences. The above-mentioned Megren, an unequivocal opponent of the war, told the researcher that she and her anti-war colleagues periodically have to participate in collections "for the special military operation." Once, for example, Megren's colleague asked her to "donate 300 rubles to support the participants in the special military operation." "I don't want to donate!" Megren replied, explaining that she does not support the operation and is against such donations. "If you tell everyone that, you'll just become a black sheep," her colleague retorted. Then, with the best of intentions, she advised Megren to give at least 300 rubles to avoid creating a stressful situation for herself, "these 300 rubles are not worth the stress." At the end of the conversation, Megren's colleague admitted that she herself does not support the war and participates in the collection only so that they "leave her alone." Thus, the norm of helping "one's own kind" forces even those who do not want to do so and do not support the war to donate.

At the same time, opponents of the war also may sincerely volunteer to help their loved ones at the front. Primarily because for them, the Russian army and the mobilized residents of the republic are not the same thing. During an interview with members of one family in Ulan-Ude—a daughter, mother, her sister and grandmother, the mother of the sisters—the researcher discovered that they were all radically opposed to the war. Even the 72-year-old grandmother, who had previously voted for Putin, changed her mind under her children's influence, who introduced her to independent journalism and "opened her eyes." "Putin's behavior was very improper. How is this possible? To attack Ukraine like this?!" She is indignant. However, a little later she proudly talks about how the Buryats help their kind at the front:

> "One nephew is fighting in Ukraine, they sent him off during the first mobilization, they came at night and took him from his home. Well! Then they gave him time to think, to get ready, that's all, and then they took him. He came home on leave twice. Oh, my God, may he come home alive. I wish this war would end soon! <...> That's how this war started, that's it, they're sending everyone there, sending everything, and cars [with humanitarian aid]. Oh, **our village sent two or three cars over, they're helping, you know, the soldiers, our boys**. They're supplying food, meat, and they're sending money, they send responsible, responsive people, straight from the administration. <...> So much food, so much meat — they're sending everything, clothes too—well, everything. <...> **Overall, our volunteer group is helping a lot**, apparently, the women who went there. Well, **the Buryats are doing a great job in this respect, of course**."

Thus, a strong local identity complicates the perception of war: for many residents of the republic, being against the war does not mean abandoning their loved ones or acquaintances who found themselves caught up in the war against their will. Therefore, while continuing to criticize the war privately, they participate in collecting aid for those who found themselves in the combat

zone. At the same time, the ability to refuse such participation is limited by the fear of social sanctions that may follow if the norm of helping ”one’s own kind” is violated.

3.2.3 The war in civilian life

Three characteristics of the region influence how the war manifests itself in the everyday lives of residents of the Republic of Buryatia: the specifics of the economic situation and the labor market, the high proportion of men drafted from Buryatia, and the development of social ties along with the strength of group affiliations. Everyone our researcher spoke to during the month she spent in the republic had relatives and friends who had gone to war, voluntarily or not. Each of them either lost someone or knew someone who had experienced loss. Because of this, despite all the attempts to distance themselves from the war and “live a normal life,” it is constantly present on the periphery of their vision, not through propaganda and official calls to join the Russian army, but in personal stories and collective practices of helping the army and the mobilized, farewells and funerals, which, unlike many other places, attract sincere attention and a large number of participants.

The economy of war and the economy of feelings

The economic situation in the region—high unemployment, relatively low salaries and few opportunities for social mobility—has influenced the overall percentage of people from the republic participating in the war, both directly and indirectly. Statistically, the poorer the region, the higher the proportion of conscripts. Buryatia is among the leaders in both categories. It is therefore not surprising that many of our researcher’s interlocutors spoke of the war as work. Some of them (usually opponents of the war) nervously joked about their compatriots leaving for Ukraine as “on duty” or “on a business trip,” while others used these euphemisms without any irony. A beauty salon worker in the village of Udurgh, whose boyfriend was a contract soldier and decided not to return to “work” in the army after being wounded, said that traveling to South Korea and Israel to earn money has become more difficult since the war began—and this also encourages people to sign contracts. An excerpt from an interview with her demonstrates how she quite casually uses the verb “work” in relation to the war:

> “And since now the **special operation has started, everyone’s working there**. <...> Many even registered their marriages, because you never know... On the one hand, it’s not very...Many of our guys go there for the money. Because all the Buryats went to South Korea, they went to Israel [to earn money]. <...> **Now it’s become difficult to go [earn money in Asia]**, now they don’t let you. Some sit [on vacation] **for a few months and go back [to the special military operation]**.”

In essence, contract military service turned out to be an alternative to other types of employment, such as seasonal work, or the absence of work at all. A 30-year-old female teacher from Udurgh Village describes the situation there, where even before the war the main ways of earning money were seasonal work and military service:

> ”Yes, **we have a lot of military servicemen and a lot of seasonal workers, because salaries are low in Buryatia**. It is a subsidized region <...>. Many say: ‘Well they were the ones who became soldiers, let them work it off, go to war. What did they think, without a war they’d just be sitting around?’ I’ve heard such awful things. And where do the young people go who did not have time to get an education due to the lack of opportunities, the impossibilities? **In reality, it’s seasonal work or becoming a contract soldier to make a living. Not because ‘I want to be a military man, to protect,’ but specifically to work there, because the salary is higher**. Half [of the village] are seasonal workers, half [of the village] went there [to war].”

In explaining how their friends or relatives were mobilized, our interlocutors always returned to two arguments: they either had no opportunity to refuse (“taken away,” “ordered,” “sent”), or there were no other ways to earn money. As in other regions, in the villages of Buryatia, men were often taken into the army from their homes, sometimes at night, without giving them time to fully come to their senses or prepare. Many emphasized that in the first months after the announcement of “partial mobilization,” it had been scary to let relatives go, and sad to receive their bodies back. Attempts to avoid mobilization resulted in a mass exodus of young men, primarily to Mongolia. However, gradually people got used to even the most tragic consequences of the war—deaths and funerals. Here is how one of the residents of Ulan-Ude, a 40-year-old male teacher at a higher educational institution, describes this change:

> “**In the beginning, we discussed every death**, went to every funeral. I remember **our boss basically forced us**: ‘One of our graduates from our alma mater is being buried. Be sure to come tomorrow.’ We didn’t even know the person. They told us and we went, stood there, saw them off. I mean to say, it was just like that. **And now I don’t even know who was the last one to die, or if anyone has died at all, and how many there were**. But before, [this information] was somehow everywhere.”

In the village, despite the fact that they have gotten used to death and war, their collective involvement does not lose its strength over time. According to a 32-year-old female teacher from Udurgh Village:

> “They’d already gotten used to [people going off to war]. <…> On the same day, **a military casket was delivered to the neighboring street. And people went over there. They expressed their condolences, sat with them**. It’s just that our small village revolves around the school.
> For all events, there’s always just the school, for all the events. **These are teachers who always go to meet the coffin trucks bearing special operations soldiers**. These are teachers who meet the live ones that are just home on vacation as well. It’s normal. <...> It’s normal somehow, they got used to it. In the beginning, of course, everyone was all, ‘Our guys are dying, both here and there.’ They cried, they roared. And now they have simply adapted. Humanitarian aid every month. [We] teachers, for example, collect every month.”

However, the way people have grown accustomed to the war and the normalization of the new everyday life in Buryatia manifests differently than in other places. While in large cities, like Moscow or St. Petersburg, for example, it was possible to continue living as if the war did not exist (after all, it did not directly affect the lives of most ordinary people), in Buryatia it is simply impossible to "just forget" about it. The proximity of death becomes a familiar and integral part of everyday life: "normal" reality with its "normal" concerns—work, leisure, family life—alternate with stories related to the war. The latter appear suddenly and routinely, then vanish just as suddenly.

Once, when our researcher went to the volunteer center in Ulan-Ude for the umpteenth time, she met Antonina Petrovna, an elderly regular at the organization. Antonina Petrovna, eager as ever, said that she had learned everything there was to know except how to make stretchers, and immediately began asking the researcher and another volunteer about the details of making them. After asking the gathered company if they had enjoyed the lunch, Antonina Petrovna said that she would not be able to come the next day, as it was one of her grandchildren's birthdays. "I have eight grandchildren, all of them boys," Antonina Petrovna said proudly, and unexpectedly added, "four more have died, all of them boys." "Died at the front?" the researcher asked again, surprised by her nonchalant delivery. "Well, yes, that's how it happened," Antonina Petrovna confirmed. After that, she continued to watch on as if nothing had happened while the researcher and another volunteer made the stretcher, and then got up and left without saying anything.

The normalization of death is part of the normalization of war. At the same time, the residents of Buryatia do not deny its influence on their lives. On the contrary, they begin to think of war not as an extraordinary event, but as the norm, as part of everyday life. Here is how our researcher describes her conversation with a young musician from Ulan-Ude, Lev:

> "Since the conversation had turned to the army again, I decided to try to bring him back to the topic of life during the war. I said that almost all my friends had gotten scared and left, and now they ask, like, how are things over there, probably really bad? Lev answered that wars are going on in all countries now. And you only feel the war if you live near the border. I answered that they still have a lot of mobilized soldiers, contract soldiers in Buryatia, that I saw constant announcements on the local Telegram news channel that someone had died. And that this likely had to have some effect on the population. To this he noted that 'it's normal,' besides, the propaganda machine is working everywhere, and in the Commonwealth of Soviet States there is also a 'cult of heroism' (which, as far as I understand, makes war more acceptable)."

Many Russians, including those living in the capitals, try to present war as a norm because "wars are being fought everywhere"—we described this process in our previous analytical report. What distinguishes Buryatia is the influence of horizontal connections on the perception of war.

Social ties and loyalty to the government

In Buryatia, unlike other regions, the perception of war is strongly influenced by horizontal connections and their integration into vertical (administrative) structures. This phenomenon is not

limited to the clannishness that usually attracts the attention of researchers. Social circles in Buryatia are very broad, including a large number of people, and are active channels for the transfer of information. They are also functional, that is, they are a resource—they are used in a variety of situations, from finding workers to renovate an apartment to solving more serious issues.

Because each person is connected to others and understands the importance and significance of these connections, war affects not just individuals, but entire groups: families, local communities, groups of colleagues. Above, we quoted excerpts from two interviews—one with a university teacher from Ulan-Ude, and the other with a teacher at a rural school. These interviews are not only united by their description of the shift in emotions associated with war, namely the transition from strong experiences to habit. Both clearly demonstrate that the group attendance of farewells and funerals is obligatory—not simply from a professional perspective ("the boss forced us"), but also from the perspective of community social norms. In the city, however, this expectation gradually fades away along with war fatigue, while in villages, where relations between people are less anonymous, it remains, maintaining the status of an obligation that is not usually challenged.

The feeling that everyone is somehow connected also contributes to the way the republic's residents discuss the war. Talking about the war, especially in a way that is critical of the official Russian stance, is considered unsafe.

Firstly, many people are afraid not only that information about a specific person's stance could fall into the wrong hands and have individual consequences, but also that it could harm a wider circle of people with whom this person is connected. One day, the researcher got into a conversation with Megren about how people's reactions to the war in the country were changing. The researcher noticed that many of her acquaintances, unhappy with the war, had left Russia. Megren said that people were leaving Buryatia for the same reason. Many of her friends had left the country, and this made her very sad. "And those who remained," Megren continued, "for example, Batod, me, Zorigma, my classmates, they all just keep quiet, because you understand what price you will pay for opening your mouth. They will finish you off, they will finish off your loved ones." And since she and her friends who remained in Buryatia love their small homeland very much and do not want to leave, explained Megren, they have to remain silent.

Many anti-war-minded interlocutors not only did not raise the topic of war first, but tried to avoid it altogether on principle, both in interviews and during informal conversation. Often, our researcher had no other option but to introduce the topic of war herself. interlocutors' reactions varied: some became nervous and frightened, some tried to avoid the topic or directly said that they did not want to talk about the war, and some were happy with the opportunity to share their accumulated emotions.

Discussing the war is also considered unsafe because it can negatively impact social ties, especially when the views of one person do not coincide with the views of another. In our first report, we wrote about how people had begun to avoid arguments and conflict in an attempt to maintain personal relationships with partners or close family members, for example. Many residents of Buryatia also do not want to lose one of their important survival resources—their social connections. In addition, due to the fact that the role of horizontal connections—especially family ties—is extremely important in the republic, the question of "what will people think of me" is not trivial. Preserving one's reputation is equal to preserving one's connections and one's own face in

the community. Here is how Batod, a 29-year-old male history teacher from Ulan-Ude, describes the change in how people discussing the war and why at some point these discussions dwindled out:

> "First of all, if you take the first days and weeks of the special operation, every family, every group of people—colleagues, others, friends, all that—they were divided into two camps [supporters and opponents of the war]. <…> That's essentially how it was across the whole country. And we were no exception. But then **some people started to come to the realization that they needed to keep on living**. And how should I react to these people? <…> These are unpredictable times. **If something happens to me, I'll come to you [for help]. And they will come to me, and so on, and so forth**. <…> [Here] family and community ties are strong. That's why if you say something, for example, your relatives will start up: 'And what about you? How are you doing?' <…> You can voice your opinion on social networks, but what about them? Social media is also just a big village, as it turns out. **You post something, an opinion of some sort—that's it, your relatives instantly know about it**. They start on you: 'Ugh, how could you?' <…> **Here, there is still the concern about 'what will my relatives think of me?'** And they also don't allow themselves to do that, to say it straight to your face, because 'I live here, they'll come to my wedding, they'll bring gifts, they'll help me out with something else, meat, milk, helping make ends meet'—that sort of thing."

These features of social connections in the region and their role produce a paradoxical effect: due to fear for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones and the unwillingness to become a "black sheep," people in tight-knit communities cannot share their own views and experiences with others. This is how one of the residents of Ulan-Ude, a 43-year-old employee of a private clinic, describes this process:

> "In my view, something terrible is happening…**Everyone is withdrawing into themselves**. The schism in society is still tangible, you could say. Naturally, there are people who support everything that is happening in our country. And there are those who do not. Accordingly, of course, you understand the state of politics now. And therefore everything is very ambiguous. We understand that **everyone is shut off, no one expresses their opinion openly**, no one tries to persuade others in any way—and these are people who have some influence among the community. It's sad to watch. But we understand why this is happening. Now everyone is in a state of internal isolation."

Thus, the strength of horizontal ties in Buryatia, instead of creating the potential for resistance to the authorities, reinforces loyalty to the state and state policies. Social connections do not become a source of formation of alternative civil institutions or identity. Due to the integration of these connections with administrative structures, fear of repression and what researchers call misplaced loyalty—loyalty to the state that has facilitated the destruction of Buryat culture, which

is an important part of Buryat identity—social connections suppress protest speech and feelings of discomfort.

About the government: Say something good or nothing at all

The researcher admitted to some of her interlocutors that there were people in her circle who believed that the state was not providing the army with enough supplies. In this way, the researcher tried to lead the conversation to a discussion of the state's role in the war. However, during a whole month of interviewing and ethnographic work in the region, not a single one of her interlocutors used this as a key to expressing their own attitude toward the state, let alone agreeing with this criticism. If the conversation turned to the lack of supplies, poor service conditions, or combat losses, the residents of the republic preferred not to mention the state at all. They explained all these shortcomings by the fact that "we live in such times" or that "it's like this everywhere." For example, when one of the volunteers in Ulan-Ude, Altyn Zorigtovna, asked our researcher why her friend, whom, according to her ethnographic legend, the researcher had come to visit, did not come with her to the volunteer center, the researcher answered that her friend did not like the war. "A friend says that our oligarchs are splitting up their assets with the Americans and it's like, ordinary people are suffering," the researcher explained. "But that's why we're helping!" Altyn Zorigtovna said, taken aback. "Everything is being destroyed. Oh, it's certainly not much. But at least we're doing something little by little."

Why do people avoid criticizing the state in everyday conversations? The most obvious assumption is the fear of causing harm to themselves or their loved ones, which we have already written about above. Perhaps criticizing the state also strikes many as useless—the state acts at its own discretion, it is impossible to influence this process, so the decisions it makes can only be accepted and discussed pointlessly. Finally, in regions with a pronounced state identity, which Buryatia largely is, active support for the war is often not so much a reflection of aggressive, chauvinistic, nationalistic ideas, but a consequence of the desire to receive recognition of oneself and one's achievements from the state. Therefore, even when state decisions threaten the lives of residents of the republic and their loved ones, they, trying to avoid danger, simultaneously seek support and participation from the state. Once, for example, our researcher witnessed a conversation between volunteer seamstresses from Ulan-Ude, Saina and Olga Vasilyevna, whose husbands, brothers, and sons had gone to war. While the two women and our researcher were drinking tea, they admitted that they did not want their family members to end up at the front. But, evidently unable to find any other way to have an influence, they united and founded an organization to help the army. This story struck our researcher because the day before, Saina and Olga Vasilyevna had appeared to her in a completely different light. That day, Saina had introduced Olga Vasilyevna to the researcher for the first time. Saina immediately explained that it was Olga Vasilyevna who had brought the folders from the local parliament that volunteers cut into parts for the production of bulletproof vests. "Soon, everything we have will be from the government," Olga Vasilyevna immediately responded. "I brought folders and all sorts of notebooks!" Saina supported her enthusiasm: "What would we do without our government? Such kindness! Everything for the front!" There was no irony in Saina's question about what they would do without "our government." Vol-

unteers perceive themselves as part of the state: it is important for them to feel that the state sees them, values them and helps them, even if, by and large, all their successes are based on effective cooperation with each other.

At the same time, local officials treat them cautiously, do not want to mention their activities without necessity and do not praise them publicly, although the volunteers are eager for this and have lively discussions any time officials appear at the center. When a television report about a patriotic organization located in the same building did not mention their volunteer initiative, they were upset, but even this did not make them speak out critically about the local government (or local television stations).

Thus the state is spoken about by the volunteers in the same way as the dead in the well-known proverb: either good, or nothing at all. Despite the fact that the volunteers’ job is to compensate for the shortcomings of state policy with their time and effort, and they are well aware of the problems of supplying the Russian army, they continue to feel pride in the president’s words about the courage of the Buryats and rejoice in any praise occasionally thrown their way by local officials.

***

Buryatia is one of the Russian regions most severely affected by the war. Unemployment and poverty made military service one of the few stable and lucrative careers available to locals even before the war. Since the war began, almost every family has had someone serve in the war zone, return home disabled, or die. Yet locals rarely talk about the war.

Despite the lack of talk about war in public places, advertisements for contract service in the army are often found on the streets of both Ulan-Ude and Udurgh. That said, while in Ulan-Ude our researcher, albeit with difficulty, managed to find events that directly or indirectly touched on military topics, in Udurgh, there were no such events whatsoever.

In Buryatia, the attitude towards the war is largely determined by two important factors: firstly, a strong sense of local identity, which is inseparable from the state identity, and secondly, tight-knight familial and community ties integrated into administrative structures. As a result of the influence of these two factors, we observe a kind of paradox. On the one hand, people are afraid to discuss the topic of war even with their relatives and loved ones, not just due to fear of reprisal, but also the fear of ruining personal relationships if loved ones turn out to have different views. On the other hand, various volunteer initiatives and practices aimed at helping the army are widespread in Buryatia, ranging from collecting money, including through government agencies, to sewing and sending equipment to the combat zone. And although some are forced to participate in these initiatives due to social pressure, many participate in them completely voluntarily and are proud of it. For such people, volunteering is not so much “helping the Russian army,” but helping their loved ones, relatives, colleagues and fellow villagers who have ended up in the combat zone. The norm of helping “one’s kind” turns volunteering into a moral obligation, which also becomes the only available way to somehow influence the difficult situation they find themselves in.

Our researcher’s interlocutors in Buryatia avoided discussing, much less criticizing, the state and local administration. This was especially noticeable in the case of volunteers, whose actions compensated for the shortcomings of state structures. They, like many Russians, did not consider

the state to be the source or cause of the war and the deaths of their fellow citizens. But, unlike many Russians, they waited with bated breath for the state to recognize their merits, were happy for any kind word from local officials, and felt that only the state could make their deceased loved ones heroes, and, therefore, their deaths were not in vain.

3.3 Chapter 3. Krasnodar Krai: "They're not bombing us and Wagner hasn't come knocking"

3.3.1 Introduction: Krasnodar Krai: Krasnodar, Yuzhny Sokol and Novonekrasovsk

Krasnodar Krai is located in the south of Russia, bordering Abkhazia, Karachay-Cherkessia, Stavropol Krai and the Rostov Oblast, and also Crimea, by sea. The region has developed agriculture, industry, commercial ports, and is developing in construction. In general, Krasnodar Krai is considered an economically successful region.

The good climate and sea coast attract both tourists and those who want to move permanently to a more comfortable region. Thanks to the flow of internal migrants from different parts of Russia, the population of the region is constantly growing. According to our interlocutors—both experts whose professional activities are somehow connected with assessing the well-being of the region, and ordinary residents—over the past few years, the population of the region has grown from five to six million. Perhaps, this is also related to the growth in construction in the region (in February 2023, it increased by 17% compared to the previous year).

Krasnodar Krai is a multinational region. It is home to the National Republic of Adygea and there are several other national republics nearby. Twenty-eight public organizations from different communities operate in the Krasnodar "Center of National Cultures." The majority of the region's residents (87.72%) are Russians, in second place are Armenians (3.62%), and in third place are Ukrainians (0.5%). Many of our interlocutors said that they have relatives in Ukraine or Ukrainian roots, adding that this is typical for the region. The Cossack identity is significant for the region's residents, although today everyone has their own understanding of what exactly this means.

We chose Krasnodar Krai for our study, among other things, because of its geographical proximity to the combat zone. The number of mobilized people in Krasnodar Krai is lower than in many other regions, while, according to calculations done by the BBC and Mediazona, the region is at the top of the rankings for the absolute number of military personnel killed in Ukraine. This apparent contradiction will be less surprising if we consider that Krasnodar Krai ranks third in the country in terms of population after Moscow and the Moscow Oblast. It is also worth taking into account that the region has close ties with the Wagner PMC. The Wagner PMC military base was located in the village of Molkino (about 40 km from Krasnodar) until July 2023. Molkino was also home to a military recruitment center, where people from different regions of Russia came for military training. In April 2024, a monument to Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin was unveiled near the former PMC base (on the grounds of the Wagner PMC chapel). According to some reports, a mass grave of dead Wagner PMC members is located in the same area.

Krasnodar undoubtedly stands out among other cities and towns in the region—it is a city with a population of over a million, with a large number of new residential buildings and districts under construction and being put into operation, traffic jams, and a shortage of schools and child care centers. Overall, construction, traffic jams, and overcrowded classrooms are the three main topics that kept coming up in our researcher's conversations with city residents. A little more than a third of our interlocutors were Krasnodar natives, and together with natives of the region, they made up about half. The other half are people who came to Krasnodar at different ages from different

parts of the former USSR. A special term has even arisen in Krasnodar to denote newcomers—"*ponaekh*." One of our interlocutors, a 46-year-old adviser to the director of a private company who was very active in the community, expressed hope that if visitors and locals interacted more with each other, the differences between them would be erased over time: "We need to go through all of this so that the city can develop, so that it stops being a city of '*Kubanoids*' [derogatory term for people living in Kuban, a historical region which encompass a big part of Krasnodar Krai, and part of several neighboring regions] and '*ponaekhs*'."

n addition to Krasnodar, our researcher visited two small cities with a population of about forty thousand (due to the dense population of the region, it is difficult to find a city with fewer people): the actively growing resort town Yuzhny Sokol and the largely industrial Novonekrasovsk, located near a large correctional facility.

Yuzhny Sokol is an actively growing resort town with health spas and recreation centers. At the same time, one of the ways to earn money for residents of Yuzhny Sokol is military service, since there are military units positioned near the city. The city is popular with tourists. In addition, there is an influx of people from other regions of Russia moving here permanently. Despite low salaries and a shortage of jobs, the city attracts families with children and elderly people with its climate, nature and comfortable infrastructure.

Unlike Krasnodar and Yuzhny Sokol, the population of Novonekrasovsk has not grown in recent years. However, it has not decreased either, remaining more or less stable since the 1970s. The city has a developed manufacturing industry, mainly related to the food industry. There are several technical schools, and according to students themselves, blue-collar jobs are in demand in the city. But school and technical school graduates do not always want to work in industrial enterprises, so they leave for Krasnodar or other Russian cities to get a higher education and find an office job. Novonekrasovsk, with its one-story city center buildings, seems more provincial than, for example, Yuzhny Sokol. One of the locals, a 34-year-old male journalist, described it this way: "It's not a backwater, and it's not this bustling, pompous Krasnodar. Somewhere in the middle." In Novonekrasovsk, the connections between residents seem closer than in the other two cities, probably in part because there aren't many newcomers to the city.

3.3.2 The war in public spaces

Our researcher spent five weeks in Krasnodar Krai. During this time, she walked a lot and also used public transport to immerse herself in the city's everyday life. Before her departure for Krasnodar Krai, we thought that in this region, unlike the other two, the war would be especially noticeable—both in the form of symbols on city streets and as a popular topic of conversation among residents. And indeed, Krasnodar and Yuzhny Sokol, at least, were abundantly strewn with letter "Z"s. However, as in the Sverdlovsk Oblast and Republic of Buryatia, people were in no hurry to discuss the war with one another.

The urban landscape in the face of the war

Walking around Krasnodar, a visiting Muscovite or St. Petersburger couldn't help but notice the Zs. The letter is found on the facades of cultural institutions, on public transport and stops, on fences

and billboards. Often, advertisements for new apartments or recently opened supermarkets are adjacent to Za Rodinu posters or flyers about contracted military service. Such proximity allows militaristic visual images (which would undoubtedly catch the eye of any visitor) to eventually become a familiar and even unnoticeable part of the city's everyday life for local residents.

At the same time, while at the beginning of the war, according to stories from our interlocutors, city residents placed Zs on personal property (for example, cars or house windows), now these symbols have vanished. A 41-year-old male transportation worker says:

> "Initially, there were a lot of vehicles, both personal and public, they were, well, many had the letter Z on them, there were a lot of [such] vehicles. Now there are much fewer—they've been removed, taken down."

Some of our interlocutors explained the disappearance of military symbols by the fact that the region's residents had "gotten used to" the war and "lost the excitement" (male, 18, college student, Novonekrasovsk)—researchers heard similar explanations in other regions. Over the past year and a half, other changes have occurred in the urban landscape of Krasnodar, which we can determine both from our interlocutors' stories and from the observations that our researcher had made in April 2022, when she came to the city to work on another project. For example, at the beginning of the war, not only pro-war but also anti-war symbols were visible around the city. However, upon returning to Krasnodar in the fall of 2023, the researcher only came across anti-war graffiti once.

The "Z"s in Yuzhny Sokol are not as conspicuous as in Krasnodar, but in both places, there are billboards featuring portraits of local residents who are heroes of the special operation. As elsewhere, the city has many flyer stands advertising contract military service. For example, our researcher came across a Soviet-style poster with the slogan 'Have you signed up as a volunteer?' The central boulevard has many monuments associated with World War II and there are flowers everywhere. The flag of Wagner PMC flutters near the monument dedicated to the "heroes of local military conflicts" and portraits of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin are surrounded by fresh flowers. In addition to flowers, residents also bring other items, such as pieces of bread (in traditional Russian culture, it is common to bring a piece of bread and other food to the grave on memorial days so that the deceased does not go hungry in the next world). This monument attracts special attention from passers-by—people approach it, read the memorial plaque on the pedestal and take photographs.

There is much less pro-war symbolism in the urban landscape of Novonekrasovsk than in Krasnodar or Yuzhny Sokol. Our researcher did not notice any posters with the letter Z or advertisements for contract service either in the central square of the city or in the main city park. However, it is worth noting that there is almost no advertising outdoors throughout the city as a whole.

But the researcher accidentally stumbled across much more original visual material when she turned from a city park towards the suburbs. It was an open-air exhibition of children's drawings:

> "The drawings were simply pasted to a fence on the street. They were different: landscapes, still lifes, portraits of animals… But my attention was drawn to the drawings

> of white doves, of which there were several, and of the globe—they resembled the anti-war drawings of Soviet children. But one of them had the inscription '*Za mir*' [Written in cyrillic, it just means "for peace," but as far as latin letter Z became a symbol of war support, 'Za мир' means something like 'for a peace with Russia will bring to Ukrainian people after freeing them from the Nazis'] Whether it was left by the author's hand, or appeared later and without the author's knowledge (since the drawings were hanging on the street and were accessible by anyone) is unclear."

During her entire time in Krasnodar, Yuzhny Sokol and Novonekrasovsk, our researcher did not hear any talk about the war in public spaces neither in public transport, nor in cafes, nor on the streets, nor among visitors to cultural events. Random passers-by and participants in public events discussed health, shopping, children's schooling, talked about trips to sanatoriums, about work and so on—but never the war.

Thus, the absence of talk about the war in public spaces seems to be a common feature of a wide variety of populated areas—the rapidly growing metropolis of Krasnodar, the popular tourist destination of Yuzhny Sokol, and the industrial city of Novonekrasovsk. Another common feature seems to be the reduction of both pro-war and anti-war symbols in urban spaces since the beginning of the war. However, Krasnodar and, to a lesser extent, Yuzhny Sokol, which both attract a lot of visitors, still retain "Z" symbols on some government buildings (and on public transport), which distinguishes them from the less touristy Novonekrasovsk and from many other regions of Russia that are further removed from the war zone.

War in the cultural space of Krasnodar: "With weather like this, how can we have a care in the world?"

In Krasnodar, our researcher visited two exhibitions dedicated to the "special military operation." She found the first of them in the centrally located State Historical and Archaeological Museum, a popular destination for both tourists and locals. A separate hall was set aside for the exhibition "OUR Heroes." A banner advertising the exhibition hung in the large windows of the museum overlooking one of the central streets of the city and caught the eye of passers-by. Here is how our researcher describes the experience in her ethnographic diary:

> "It consisted mostly of stands with blocks of text and photographs. The stands were about the collapse of the USSR, post-Soviet Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the "Russian Spring," the suffering of Donbass, the prerequisites for the "special military operation," the annexation of new territories and the heroes of the special operation. There were also a few military artifacts, as well as letters from children to soldiers and letters from soldiers to children. In this same hall there were stands about Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Syria."

The exhibition was held in a walk-through hall with no visitors or employees on duty stationed there. However, at one point, a caretaker from the neighboring hall looked into the room. The researcher immediately asked her how long ago this exhibition had appeared. It turned out that

it had opened two months ago (in September 2023) and that they were planning to "expand and supplement" it.

The second exhibition was found in a thematically related museum. While perusing a list of museums in Krasnodar, our researcher found the Museum of Military Glory. From the name of the museum, she assumed that it might contain something connected with the war between Russia and Ukraine. And her assumptions were justified:

> "The museum was located on a small island; the entire island (at least the landscaped part) was occupied by Victory Park. <…> I found myself on Memory Alley, dedicated to World War II. Then I went into the park itself, which had many monuments and exhibits like tanks and mines. I walked through this unique park toward the museum. Next to the entrance, I found stands dedicated to the heroes of the special operation. <…> When I entered, there were several families with children aged 5-12. The museum turned out to be small—only two rooms. One hall was dedicated to World War II. The second was devoted to all the wars that came after-that is, the war in Afghanistan, two Chechen wars, the 2008 war in Georgia, and, of course, the "special operation." Apart from the stands with photographs and text, there was almost nothing there <…>. The younger children were running around and making noise—they were clearly not very interested. Adults pulled them over and told them things about the exhibits. One father advised his son to read what was written on the board."

While our researcher did not encounter any other visitors to the "OUR Heroes" hall in the historical and archaeological museum, in the Museum of Military Glory, families with children were interacting with the exhibit. However, it was the parents who showed interest, not the children. It seems logical that in the historical and archival museum with many ethnographic, zoological and other such exhibitions, the hall about the heroes of special operation, which contains nothing but ideologically charged stands, is not popular. The very nature of the exhibition—from the eye-catching poster and text regurgitating the official, state view of the war, to the practically empty hall with no influx of visitors—allows us to assume that the exhibition was made, as is often the case in Russia, "for the press." The exhibition in the Museum of Military Glory made a completely different impression. Unlike the historical and archaeological museum, which is located in the city center and attracts both local residents and tourists, the Museum of Military Glory is not located in the very center, is not very well known even among Krasnodar residents and is probably loved and attended by a specific audience with a special interest in the theme of the museum.

While in Krasnodar, our researcher also followed local bulletins with announcements of current city events, hoping to find something somehow connected to the war. In the very first days, on one of the city's social media pages, she came across an announcement for a lecture by Denis Abramenko, dedicated to how to organize assistance to residents of the "new territories of Russia." The event required that you pre-register, but apparently anyone could sign up for it using the link on the page, which is what the researcher did. Once she was sitting in the hall and the event was about to begin, she discovered that there were no more than thirty people there, most of whom were young, looking to be sixteen to twenty-five years old. In her ethnographic diary, the researcher

adds: “There were very few women in the hall, and the young people looked like students from a capital university. In particular, a young man with dyed white hair and a rather original haircut was sitting opposite me.”

By his own accounts, Denis Abramenko collected humanitarian aid and took it to the Donetsk, Luhansk and Kherson regions. He spoke with eagerness and enthusiasm about how people live there, what they need and how difficult it is to help them. Despite his undoubtedly pro-war views, Denis Abramenko occasionally criticized the official, state view of the war. For example, after the lecture, one of the listeners asked what life was like before the war in Mariupol. Abramenko said something to the effect that people lived well, like everywhere else, which prompted indignation from the person who asked the question. “What do you mean, well? They say that people were kidnapped, shot, tortured there!” He was outraged. Abramenko hastened to explain: “They kidnapped political opponents, deputies of pro-Russian parties, pro-Russian activists—yes, of course, they were kidnapped and tortured by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, but ordinary people lived well.” This and similar questions and comments from the audience demonstrate that the audience was filled with interested people with pro-war views, representatives of that very minority of confident supporters of the war recorded by surveys. Probably, Denis Abramenko—who looked no older than thirty-five and is charismatic, with a clear civic position—confidently and even boldly discussing topics important to the country, attracted the attention of this young crowd.

Our researcher, of course, decided not to limit herself to visiting such a specific event. She also attended regular city events—two different evening events that were part of the festival of national cultures of the region—in order to see how the current war is reflected in the cultural and social life of the city. As part of the festival of national cultures, which coincided with the time of our researcher’s stay in the city, different peoples living in the Krasnodar region held creative events. First, the researcher attended an evening of culture of one of the peoples of the Caucasus. Here, she almost forgot that she was in a country at war: girls and boys in national costumes danced on the stage, the hosts commented on each number, and an atmosphere of infectious celebration and fun filled the space, pulling our researcher in as well. However, at the end of the evening, something disturbed this state of serenity—one of the speakers suddenly said: “I wanted to wish everyone health and unclouded skies. Today I would like there to be peace in Kuban, and everywhere.” It is difficult to say what it was: a hidden anti-war commentary? A wish for “peace after our speedy victory?” Or maybe it was just a ritual phrase so familiar to everyone who received Soviet and post-Soviet primary school education?

Three weeks later, she attended another event within the framework of the same festival: an evening of Cossack culture. She went there for a reason: she believed that in lieu of the direct participation of Kuban Cossacks in the military hostilities in Ukraine, it would be difficult not to talk about the war. Our researcher’s intuition did not fail her: although the war was not the center of events, some of the participants in the event talked about it. Here is what she wrote in her diary:

> “After the opening remarks, the guests of honor gave speeches. One dedicated her speech to Ukraine. She began by saying that Krasnodar Krai has always had many ties with Ukraine: both cultural and economic. And then she gave an example of ”friendship between peoples”: at concerts dedicated to supporting Russian troops

> participating in the special military operation, Ukrainian songs were performed in the Ukrainian language, ”because there is no war between peoples and between cultures, and fascism has no nationality.”

Thus, within the framework of one festival, two thematically similar public events interacted with the topic of the war in Ukraine in very different ways. In the case of the first, one could forget that the country was waging a war, and in the second, one could hear a fiery speech dedicated to Ukraine and the special operation. It is important, however, to take note of to the content of this speech, combined with the content of the event itself: in essence, it explained why performing songs in Ukrainian within the framework of the festival—for which, by the way, some Russian citizens have already received fines and been arrested—is a pro-Russian, and not at all an anti-Russian practice.

Overall, during the four hours our researcher spent at both citywide events in Krasnodar, she managed to hear only one short speech about the special operation given by one of the many participants—and this probably due to special circumstances—to justify the admissibility of singing songs in Ukrainian. Thus, if you turn away from the banners bearing the letter Z and bypass the museums with exhibits dedicated to the war, Krasnodar would seem like an ordinary southern city, with street musicians singing in the pedestrian alleyways in the evenings, people dancing, strolling leisurely and serenely, sitting in cafes and bars. As one of the residents of Krasnodar noted in a conversation with our researcher: “With weather like this, how can we have a care in the world? This weather makes you want to walk around and enjoy life, and not think about what is happening in other places.”

Unity Day in Yuzhny Sokol

Our researcher just happened to find herself in Yuzhny Sokol on Unity Day—a holiday that in 2005 replaced the “Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution,” which had been widely celebrated in the USSR. In addition to a concert called ”Russia Unites!” in the central park on the occasion of Unity Day, a poetry festival ”For Russia” was planned at the city library.

The central city park was neat, with well-kept flowerbeds and paved alleys lined with tall trees, in whose shade it would be so pleasant to relax on a bench on a hot sunny day. The researcher heard that the concert had already begun as soon as she entered the park through the central entrance, and hurried towards the music. The louder the music became, the more people there were. Some were buying souvenirs in the shops, some were strolling with cotton candy or gobbling down pies. It was a festive atmosphere overall, and our researcher so badly wanted to give herself over to it! But, deciding that in her case the cotton candy would only interfere with her celebrations, the researcher made her way closer to the stage. The stage was filled with mostly patriotic songs with a variety of themes: Cossack, Soviet, stylized Russian folk. People were listening and dancing.

That same evening, the researcher went to the city library, where a poetry festival with the intriguing name “For Russia” was taking place. Judging by the poster, the event promised to be eventful—a film screening, a team game, and the titular poetry reading were scheduled. Here is how our researcher describes her impressions in her ethnographic diary:

> "I stepped into the hall. The chairs were arranged in a rectangle with one open side. Two women invited everyone to sit down. Almost all the seats, a little over thirty, were already taken. I saw a free chair in the middle of one of the tables and sat down. The hall was decorated with numerous letter 'Z's. People were still coming in and the employees brought additional chairs. When everyone was seated, the hosts announced that the evening of festivities had begun. In the opening speech, it was said that Unity Day is one of the most important holidays of our multinational country. After the speech, on the big screen in the corner of the hall, the large letter Z was replaced by a video about Minin and Pozharsky <...>. The host opened the poetry reading by reciting a poem from the internet dedicated to a soldier of the special operation. Then the poets, who made up at least a third of the people there, began to read their own poems in turn. Almost all of them were about the war, and half specifically about the special operation <...>. A small group of school-age youth left in an organized manner around the second hour of the event. Against the general background of heroic military pathos, rare interspersed poems about love for one's hometown or region seemed like a breath of fresh air <...>. After the poetry readings, they announced a break before watching the film, but I seized the moment and left the event."

The poems and speeches read throughout the evening were unlike any previous public performances that our researcher had heard at events in Krasnodar and here in Yuzhny Sokol. They made references to the war, addressed the Russian servicemen who were fighting and suffering there—both residents of the city and beyond. At the same time, it seemed that the event had attracted the library's regular audience. This was confirmed by the host, who announced that "all the poets speaking today are our good friends." It can be assumed that the war for these members of the city community who regularly write and read their poems to each other had become another subject through which they could realize their creative potential.

Outside of the patriotic events, the atmosphere in the city was no less carefree than in Krasnodar. People strolled, sat on benches with ice cream and coffee, listened to music and danced in the city park all morning, day and evening.

"Happy Holiday, Comrades!" in Novonekrasovsk

Like the residents of Krasnodar and Yuzhny Sokol (as well as the residents of the two other regions where we conducted the research—see Chapters 1.1 and 1.2), the residents of Novonekrasov claimed that they did not feel the impact of the war on their everyday lives. However, according to our interlocutors, some things in the city changed in connection with the war—for example, themed citywide events began to be organized. Some residents spoke ironically about such events. "These jamborees with patriotic dancing started happening," a local 34-year-old male journalist commented in an interview. Another interlocutor, a 30-year-old teacher, on the contrary, admitted that such events touched her to the depths of her soul:

> "When the topic is touched upon at events, when you actually see people crying, because they read these poems, all these stories, videos—even a granny with a flag. My God! I don't know, **I probably cried for two days**."

She also added that such events help people unite, support the participants of the special operation and lift people's spirits: "Everyone tries to be more positive, tries to support."

Our researcher did not witness any major events or concerts in the city, but she did attend a small rally at the Lenin monument in honor of the anniversary of the Great October Revolution. There was no stage as such at the rally: participants took turns going to the monument, to the center of the circle, and delivering speeches. All those who came—about thirty people—had flowers, congratulated each other, and celebrated the holiday. At the same time, the speakers did not avoid the current political agenda in their speeches. They talked about the need to help the front, refugees, and residents of Russia's border regions. The researcher noted that they were not afraid to call the war a war. For example, Nina, one of the women of about seventy who came to the monument, began her speech with the words: "Comrades! There is a war going on! We say 'special operation,' but in reality it is a war, people are constantly dying…" However, her speech ended on a positive note: "Victory will be ours, the enemy will be defeated! Happy holiday, comrades!"

In Novonekrasovsk, our researcher regularly communicated with city activists, among whom were people with different attitudes toward the war and the government. She found herself in their company on an excursion to a museum in a neighboring district. One member of the party was Nina, who had spoken at a rally several days earlier.

The museum was dedicated to the history of the region starting from the 1920s. The exhibitions gave information about the formation of the collective farm, World War II and occupation, as well as the post-war reconstruction of the region. The exhibition stand introduced visitors to the heroes of war and labor who lived in the district. There was also a small stand with photographs of local residents who died in Afghanistan. In front of this stand, the following dialogue took place between Nina and the tour guide, Vladimir, a man about her age. Pointing to it, Vladimir told the visitors: "These are our peacekeeping soldiers." Nina asked: "Are there any among them who have died in the special operation?" Vladimir answered evasively: "No information on that yet." Nina asked with interest: "No? Has God been merciful?" Vladimir explained that there were dead people, but there was too little information about them yet. For some reason, Nina was not satisfied with this answer, and she said somewhat defiantly: "But the region should know about this!" Vladimir said that there are also "those who came from over there" in the area, but they "don't talk much about it" and then added: "It's absolute hell, but now a year and a half has passed, a lot has changed, new tactics have appeared…" he paused briefly but meaningfully before changing the subject.

The local history museum also contained traces of war. The researcher found two stands dedicated to the special operation located near the entrance. They informed visitors about the Euromaidan and the Russian Spring, the Minsk agreements and the events leading up to the special operation. The researcher visited the local history museum in the middle of the working day—

perhaps for this reason, or perhaps due to the unpopularity of the museum itself, she did not find any other visitors there.

It seems that in Novonekrasovsk, despite the absence of war symbols in the urban landscape, the war nevertheless does not go unnoticed. From time to time it reminds us of its existence at city events or in the local museum, and also in everyday conversations between people, which will be the subject of a separate section of this chapter.

Military volunteering: "You can't stop the war, but you can send diapers, wet pads and condensed milk"

Despite the fact that in Krasnodar Krai we were unable to attend meetings of volunteer organizations helping the army, among our interlocutors there were regularly people involved in volunteering in one format or another. From them, we know what sorts of initiatives there are in the region.

In Krasnodar, for example, volunteer groups exist under several different political parties. In addition, some of our researcher's interlocutors said that humanitarian aid is collected in Orthodox churches, and in some of them, parishioners even weave camouflage nets and sew underwear for the wounded. In Yuzhny Sokol, there is a large city volunteer organization—almost all of our interlocutors mentioned it. Residents of Novonekrasovsk spoke about at least several volunteer efforts related to the war. For example, in the city there is a youth volunteer organization held at one of the local colleges, most of whose participants are students of the college. Collection of humanitarian aid is also organized by the local branch of at least one of the political parties and this aid, according to one of our interlocutors, is sent primarily to civilians, not to the army. There are also various grassroots initiatives in Novonekrasovsk. For example, one of our interlocutors told us about a Telegram chat she is a member of—according to her, where "girls collect money and buy everything needed for the front."

Often, pro-war volunteering becomes a natural continuation of the other types of volunteer and civic activity in which some of our interlocutors were involved before the war. For example, 39-year-old politician Leonid, our researcher's interlocutor in Krasnodar, participated in solving various urban, environmental and social projects before the war. But with the start of the war, war-related volunteering also appeared in his life: "There are more concerns about helping our soldiers. Well, first the refugees, and then the soldiers. We are constantly collecting something, helping someone with something."

Another resident of Krasnodar, 59-year-old retiree Irina, has been retired for the last few years. Before the war, she "worked on various charitable socially-oriented projects," but now she participates in "projects related to the SVO." While Leonid is the person who organizes collections and humanitarian aid, then Irina responds to private requests and tries to involve her acquaintances in this process, since she does not have enough resources of her own:

> "That is, I'm just doing it for myself now...For example, in the Lugansk hospital they need bed linen, towels, something else, I just ask my friends who has what, I go myself, collect it, wash it, iron it, take it, and hand it all over to the warehouse."

As we can assume, for people who have long been involved in civil activity, pro-war volunteering simply becomes another element of it. Our researcher's interlocutor Vitaly, a 44-year-old resident of Novonerkasovsk and a member of one of the parliamentary parties, thinks it is important to help the peaceful residents of Donbass and refugees, and not the Russian army:

> "We only help the civilian population. That's our policy. Well, primarily because we have a whole ministry there for the army that should deal with this—the state should be responsible for this. In general, we don't interfere there. And no one will help the civilian population except us."

Collecting humanitarian aid is an activity that allows Leonid, Irina and Vitaly to actively demonstrate their values. Often, this is facilitated by the corresponding social connections—their entire structure is rebuilt to meet current practical tasks. This "transition" turns out to be the most logical and does not require additional efforts from our interlocutors.

Another clear way to "enter" volunteering is through interaction with various organizations that, at first glance, have no connection with the army or the front. Our interlocutors visit churches, take their children to kindergartens, and attend parent-teacher meetings at schools. These institutions often collect humanitarian aid. One of our interlocutors, 38-year-old Svetlana, a fashion designer from Krasnodar, told us about her experience: "We recently collected volunteer aid for the hospital at the school where my child goes. They collect in churches, and we go to church." Our researcher met Svetlana at her rented apartment—she invited the woman over so that they could have a calm and leisurely conversation. While stirring her cup of tea, Svetlana explained her motives: "Because there are people both here and there. You can't do anything else except collect aid. You can't stop the war, but you can send diapers, wet pads, condensed milk." We found a similar attitude among volunteers in Buryatia (see section 1.2.2): the motive for participation in such activities may not be support for the war at all, but a feeling of powerlessness that these people are trying to overcome. Feeling that they are unable to influence the course of the war, to stop it, they try to do at least something—sometimes this "something" becomes assistance to residents of frontline zones or refugees, and sometimes—assistance to mobilized soldiers.

Some residents of the region consider such volunteer projects to be a method of education, particularly patriotic education. For example, another resident of Krasnodar, 33-year-old Olga, an engineer on maternity leave, a mother of two small children, told our researcher about volunteer initiatives in the daycare center her children attend:

> "They made trench candles, sent toys to the children of Donbass. **I don't see anything wrong with that**, in principle. And they wrote letters to the soldiers, postcards, and the like. **Maybe some kind of patriotic spirit can be cultivated** in children. **But how much do they understand what it's for?** They're still little. It seems like **all schools and kindergartens are now obliged to do this**."

What is indicative in this fragment is how Olga talks about the efforts to help the army in which her children are involved. On the one hand, she sees "nothing wrong" with them and suggests that in this way it is possible to cultivate a "patriotic spirit." But the next interrogative sentence seems

to refute her own argument: isn't kindergarten it too early to engage in patriotic education? And finally, this fragment ends with a simple statement of what is happening around: in one way or another, all schools and day care centers are doing this. In other words, Olga reflects on the reality around her, tries on different arguments, but ultimately, not having, like many, a clear opinion about the war, military volunteering and patriotic education, she accepts reality as it is.

Of course, not all daycares and schools are involved in assisting the army. However, the situation at her child's daycare is not exceptional. Tamara, a thirty-year-old school teacher from Novonekrasovsk, tells our researcher about her active participation in collecting humanitarian aid—together with her children, she and her colleagues write letters to the front and make gifts for the military:

> "We collect humanitarian aid ourselves and take it to the collection point. We've already made several trips, not to schools, but to the city collection point. We quickly got ready, took it. <...> Our teachers chopped cabbage for them there. <...>. We also made these amulets for the special operation fighters, and sent them along with letters."

Tamara explains that such initiatives at her school have become one of the tools for working with "difficult" classes—an opportunity to keep children busy, to instill in them values that are significant, in her opinion: "That is, we try to engage them somehow. For Mother's Day, we make crafts, concerts—that's what we're doing here…trying to engage on a spiritual level."

It was very important for Tamara to emphasize the voluntary nature of such activity, including for children: schoolchildren, as she explains, bring what they can. At the same time, the observations we made in Buryatia, where our researcher had encountered bored school children doing mandatory "volunteer" work, allow us to at least assume that children may have a different view of military volunteering.

Veronica, a lively woman of 57 and another one of our researcher's interlocutors in Krasnodar, told that she once participated in weaving nets in a church not far from her home. Her main desire, however, was not to help the special operation fighters, but her already very elderly mother: "My mother and I twisted ribbons, from which a camouflage net would later be made. I thought that working with her hands would be good for her."

As we could see, Veronica, Tamara, Olga and Svetlana, like many other interlocutors, were not confident supporters of the special operation, despite their periodic participation in military volunteer efforts. In each individual case, the reasons for involvement in such practices, as a rule, lie beyond the framework of support or non-support of the war. In other words, volunteers can be driven by a variety of motives, in which the desire to "contribute to victory" is only a small part.

For 37-year-old education worker Kristina, a resident of Yuzhny Sokol, volunteering has become a significant part of her life:

> "I help weave camouflage nets. I've seen recently how people are willing to spend their time going [to volunteer], sewing, weaving, cooking. It really inspires me. But it also helps to understand that even in a terrible situation, you won't be alone, that there will always be those who will help you."

Kristina and her husband moved to Yuzhny Sokol several years ago, and at the beginning of the war they got divorced. The volunteer community plays an important role in her life—she feels more confident and understands that she has someone to rely on during difficult times. Her divorce from her husband and living in the city without family nearby likely only increased her need for such a community.

Other Krasnodar Krai residents help the army primarily because their loved ones ended up in the military zone. The story of Darya, a 60-year-old teacher from Novonekrasovsk, aptly illustrates this trend. Her godmother's son was mobilized, and since then Darya has been sending packages to the front from time to time—both to her godmother's son and to his fellow soldiers. This often requires Darya to haggle and look for cheaper prices. For example, she recently bought several kilograms of apples and managed to negotiate a discount with the vendor. Working together with other city residents with loved ones at the front, Darya raised money to pay to have the humanitarian aid delivered directly to the combat zone. "The apples were snatched up faster than anything else!" she says, not without pride.

Antonina, an elderly cultural worker from Novonekrasovsk, is a vivid example of a person volunteering due to her strong pro-war views. In a conversation with our researcher, she sharply condemned anyone who refuses to participate in collecting humanitarian aid. Her condemnation was primarily aimed at those who have sufficient financial means to do so. Antonina talked about her friend who did not want to participate in collecting money for the front, explaining that he "did not send anything there." Speaking about this, Antonina focused on the moral aspect of his refusal, pointing out his wealth: "He drives a car worth several million and was griping about a thousand rubles. Really? That's also a stance. And what about after all this?" she said indignantly. Antonina herself is a member of one of the city's initiative groups and is involved in a variety of activities. She says:

> "We do everything we can here: I weave nets, knit socks, sew underpants, make borscht, soups. I help everyone as much as I can, I put together packages, we collect here, I invite people to donate, we collect food, money, and send packages over there."

In summary, many residents of Krasnodar Krai are involved in volunteer activities in one way or another—even among our small pool of interlocutors, there were quite a few. Of course, some of them are doing this in response to their own confident pro-war views and try to involve others in volunteer efforts (Antonina, for instance). The majority participate in military volunteering for a variety of reasons and are not necessarily active proponents of the war. Some have been involved in various forms of social activism before, and military volunteering provides them with another opportunity to express this. For some, volunteering serves an important social function—it provides a sense of community, a feeling that the townsfolk will always support each other in difficult times. Some decide to volunteer because they are powerless to influence the course of the war, but see this as an opportunity to at least somehow get involved and maintain control over what is happening. Some simply want to help loved ones who find themselves on the front lines against their will.

3.3.3 The war in civilian life: “Has nothing changed?”

Visitors to Krasnodar Krai, like our researcher, risk dissolving in the serenity of the warm and cozy southern region. Everyday life in an atmosphere like this seems to help “fence people off” from the war: “With weather like this, how can we have a care in the world?”—as we recall one of the city’s residents said. According to most of our interlocutors, the war did not affect them directly: they do not have relatives or loved ones who went to the front, they continue to go to work, take their children to school or daycare, and to relax by the sea. Nevertheless, the war constantly came up in our researcher’s conversations with locals, and not simply because the researcher regularly asked questions about it. After all, not many people in Russia could talk about the last two years of their lives without touching on the war in any way.

Taxi drivers comprised many of our researcher’s casual interlocutors. They were eager to answer questions and share their own thoughts during the drive. During one of these trips around Krasnodar, taxi driver Alexander said: “Nobody needs this war. But since it exists, you can’t run away from it.” However, we constantly had the feeling that our interlocutors were distancing themselves from the war. “I don’t want to go to any large events, because it will definitely sneak in there, somehow or another. Otherwise, no. They’re not bombing us, Wagner hasn’t come knocking. Visually, there have been no changes,” said Dmitry, a 44-year-old freelancer from Krasnodar.

In many ways, our observations in Krasnodar Krai coincide with the words of taxi driver Alexander. Most of our interlocutors were not at all happy about the war, but accepted it, believing that they would not be able to influence the course of events in any way.

Effects of the war on the economy and everyday life

In an attempt to start a conversation about the impact of the war on the lives of her interlocutors, our researcher often approached from afar, asking about what had changed in the city over the past couple of years. Most often, she received the same answer: “Nothing has changed.” However, if the researcher continued this conversation, she found out that the life of the city and the life of the interlocutor themselves had undergone many changes in recent years, many of them in connection with the war.

On one of her first days in Yuzhny Sokol, while strolling through the park, our researcher saw a woman in her sixties sitting on a bench and walked up to her in order to ask her about the city. The woman, who introduced herself as Nadezhda, said that she had been living in the city for over ten years and that she was happy there—it was warm, cozy and the air was clean. When the researcher carefully changed the conversation to the special operation and whether anything had changed in the city since it began, Nadezhda repeated the words of other interlocutors: “It doesn’t really concern us, us retirees. We haven’t heard that there have been any changes here [in relation to the war]. So I can’t say. It’s calm and quiet.” Nevertheless, she recalled the airport that had closed in Krasnodar: ”It has become more difficult to fly now—you have to get to Sochi, it’s the only airport.” And then she added: ”And we also have a neighbor who came over here from Donetsk. But we became friends, we are on very good terms. We go out, take walks together.”

Other people our researcher interviewed also recalled the airport that had closed. Taxi driver Anatoly, who was driving our researcher to one of the city events in Krasnodar, noted that the closed airport created significant difficulties: "You have to take the Lastochka [train] to Sochi, and only there can you catch a plane." But the rise in prices was no less significant for him: "The prices have gone through the roof! For everything." The same sentiments were echoed by another of the researcher's interviewees from Krasnodar, a 41-year-old transport worker with whom she struck up conversation at a festival of national cultures of the region:

> "I started paying more attention to the prices when buying things. You start thinking about the pragmatic need, the necessity of buying a product—is it necessary or not, can it wait."

At the same time, our interlocutors drew attention to the fact that, compared to other regions, Krasnodar Krai is economically prosperous. During a walk through the autumn city park of Novonekrasovsk, Konstantin, a 34-year-old journalist, shared the following thoughts with our researcher:

> "In Kuban, **people more or less live well**. People outside Kuban really don't have enough money. And the **tactic of throwing money at people for the sake of war worked perfectly**. That is, many people go to war because it's a simple way to earn money. In Kuban, people are more or less well-fed anyway, and it's not that easy to lure them away with money. They have a nest egg, a vegetable garden. **When you have sausage in the fridge, you don't really want to fight**."

Konstantin noted that the financial situation of some of his family and friends, as well as his own, had changed for the worse after the war began. However, no one he knew had gone to serve under contract simply for the sake of earning money.

Residents of the region also spoke about difficulties in their professional activities that arose due to sanctions. For example, Denis, a 26-year-old doctor from Krasnodar, said that he and his colleagues had experienced an acute material shortage, particularly in 2022:

> "A lot of equipment distributors have stopped delivering to Russia because of sanctions. While the situation with the equipment isn't so bad yet because we have some in stock, with the consumables, which are changed after each patient <...> we've definitely felt it. Now the situation is stabilizing, mostly due to our Chinese partners; we are now slowly switching to Chinese equipment and using their supplies."

Not just medical workers, but also IT specialists complained about these shortages. However, both groups, like Denis, said that at the moment, in the fall of 2023, everything had more or less improved—maybe things still were not back to the way they were before the war, but it is at least possible to continue work.

Alexandra, a young woman our researcher had met during her previous trip to Krasnodar, lamented that "a lot of products have disappeared"—the makeup she used to use and the clothing stores where she used to shop were all gone. She said "I no longer know where to go on vacation

with my family. Before we went to Europe, last year we went to Sochi, where the prices are like those in Europe, but the conditions are incomparably worse."

Despite the fact that residents of Krasnodar Krai report various everyday difficulties that have arisen in the face of the war, they do not consider the latter to be serious enough to be called "life changes." Real changes, as we understood from conversations with our interlocutors, occur when someone close to them ends up in a combat zone. But we encountered exceedingly few of these people.

No one from our family has gone, so it must be okay, right?

At the same time, many of our interlocutors had acquaintances who went to war; many also regularly heard stories about fellow countrymen fighting or even dying. If the heroes of these stories were professional soldiers or volunteers, they did not evoke much sympathy from our interlocutors—after all, they had made their own choice. "Well, go ahead and fight, if you want to earn the money," the researcher's neighbor in Krasnodar, a 51-year old female education worker, once said.

The availability of those willing to serve under contract, combined with the overall wealth of the region, gives those who do not want to participate in the war the opportunity to avoid it. "I have a close friend, a good guy <...>. About two months ago, he received a summons for military training, he went and paid his way out of it," journalist Konstantin told our researcher during an evening walk in the park in Novonekrasovsk. Realizing that there are enough people willing to go to the combat zone, many feel relieved. Maxim, a 27-year-old IT specialist who has a deferment from mobilization due to work, admitted to our researcher during an interview: "These are good guys who are actually sitting in the trenches instead of us now, because they went there, and one way or another gave us the opportunity not to go."

However, far from all of our interlocutors could look to the future with confidence. For example, reflecting in an interview on what has changed for her family since the beginning of the special operation, Olga, a 33-year-old engineer on maternity leave, concluded: "The war has not affected us in any way, thank God. But I think that it has affected some families." For example, she said that her classmate was recently buried, that "my husband has a couple of friends who are still serving there—military men, they were called up." Olga's own husband, according to her, "got out of it;" he "is only 'conditionally fit' for health reasons, according to his military ID." At the same time, Olga realizes that she is not protected from the influence of the war on her life in the future—under certain circumstances, her husband may be called up for war, "So there is still that fear."

Not all of our interlocutors are concerned about their future. For example, according to Nikolai, a 55-year-old Krasnodar construction worker and an active supporter of the war, whom our researcher met in a park where he was sitting, legs crossed, reading a newspaper, nothing special is happening in the country: "People are dying, of course, but people die in civilian life too. I don't think it's a great catastrophe," he explained. No one from his circle was "taken" to war ("not even my neighbors, let alone relatives"), and he himself has almost no risk of suffering—he is well over fifty, and he is on bad terms with his adult son:

> "He's such a little worm that mobilization wasn't even a threat to him. We had a falling out a long time ago, and he told me, 'Dad, get me out of the army.' I told him the only way I could get him out of it was if he enrolled in a [technical] school, that's the only way. But he didn't want to study, and he didn't want to go to the army."

For many of our interlocutors in Krasnodar Krai, it was only after someone they loved had become involved in the war that it started to "affect" their lives. Some of them felt relieved that the war had not directly affected them. "Knock on wood, no one in the family has gone," says 51-year-old Tatyana from Krasnodar. Nevertheless, our interlocutors felt the fear of an uncertain future (see Chapter 2.4 for more details) and a sense of insecurity, even if they "don't notice" the war on a day-to-day level.

Nervous Tension

Maxim, the same young IT specialist who spoke above about "the guys sitting in the trenches instead of us," was drinking coffee, sitting opposite our researcher in one of Krasnodar's popular coffee shops, and chose his words carefully: "For the most part, probably, if you look at the city, nothing has changed: the same people, still walking around freely." Then he continued:

> "But if we talk about worldviews, then certainly... Although, it could affect people living in Krasnodar Krai just as much as it does people living anywhere in Russia...Because it undoubtedly added a sense of instability to everyday life."

Unobtrusive music was playing in the background, people at the neighboring tables were drinking coffee, eating desserts, their conversations merging into a monotonous buzz. Maxim finished his thought: "People are scared, they're in a state of emotional instability, financial and economic instability."

One day, our researcher was returning home along the central street of Krasnodar after yet another interview and noticed a girl of about twenty sitting alone on a bench. The researcher came up to introduce herself and asked permission to ask a few questions for a sociological study. The girl seemed to be trying to distance herself from what was happening: "It doesn't concern me, so that's fine." However, speaking about the city, she noted:

> "It seems like **everyone has become more overburdened**. They're having problems at work, and constant financial issues. And the city itself has become busier, with lots and lots of people. I don't think there was anything like this before, everything was calmer, lighter. And **now everything is harsher**."

Like Maxim, this girl mentions changes in the psychological state of those around her, but claims that the war has not affected her own life. Freelancer Dmitry admits to changes in his emotional state: "It has affected my life—I've become nervous, so to speak. That is, as a person who is not very much for it—I find many things unpleasant, I have to filter my words more."

While sitting on the summer veranda of another popular coffee shop in Krasnodar, another interlocutor, 26-year-old Krasnodar doctor Denis, shared one possible explanation for the "emotional instability" that the previously mentioned Maxim also spoke about:

> "Krasnodar is quite close to all this, so there is a **certain tension** in the city. **It's not normal for us to talk about it openly**, but people live, frankly, in tension, and—what can I say?—I do too. We know that volunteers are leaving from here to Ukraine, we see all this, we live in it."

This anxiety was expressed even more frankly by 31-year-old doctor Elena from Novonekrasovsk, but she added that she herself tries not to give in to it:

> "**We're still close to it here. There are concerns, of course**. And we have the ill-fated Crimea nearby. If something happens to Crimea, what then? What if they decide to cross the strait here, to us. But **I prefer not to think about it at the moment**, because when you start to wind yourself up, start to panic, **I don't see the point**, in living, suffering, and productivity is falling, and I can't have an impact on anything. So as for thinking about it…I try not to."

However, many of our researcher's interlocutors in Krasnodar Krai would hardly agree with Maxim, much less with Denis. Most of them expressed confidence that Krasnodar Krai is no more dangerous than any other region in Russia.

Confidence in safety

Several months before our researcher arrived in Krasnodar, the city suffered from a drone attack, which damaged two houses, but there were no casualties. Only a few of the researcher's interlocutors recalled this story, and they did not express any concern about it. Our researcher's neighbor, 51-year-old education worker Tatyana, said this: "There was a bang somewhere, on Morskaya, I think. But I didn't hear it."

Leaving Krasnodar for Yuzhny Sokol, the researcher called a taxi to the station and, as usual, started talking to the driver. She asked how long he had lived in the city, and then, as a curious tourist, asked whether the city felt the proximity of war. "Of course not!" The taxi driver was surprised. Our researcher expressed her own astonishment in response: "Well, there was that drone that flew over here, it hit a house!" The driver didn't seem to attach much importance to this: "Yeah... Some drone, or what was that? It happened in Moscow too! One even flew to the Kremlin!" We see that even when the researcher herself reminded her interlocutor about the immediate effect of the war, he was in no hurry to share her concern. 'Yes, of course,' the driver seems to say, 'I know about this event, but drones fall on cities everywhere, even in the capital, and there is nothing special about this, nothing worth thinking about or talking about.' We have already encountered similar attempts by our interlocutors to present extraordinary events as the norm more than once and even wrote about this method of normalizing war in a previous analytical report. The peculiarity of this dialogue, however, is the following: it demonstrates that not only distant and therefore abstract events (a war happening somewhere in Ukraine), but also something directly observed and experienced (a drone the next street over) can over time become part of everyday life, and not seem extraordinary.

When our researcher brought up the fact that the front line was very close in conversation, interlocutors usually objected: "Well, I beg your pardon, from the point of view of the capitals it

is not so far. But overall, it is quite far!" (m., 46 years old, advisor to the director of a private company, Krasnodar). Or: "Rostov, of course, is very close. But here it is quiet. Only these planes make a 'bang'" (f., 30 years old, an employee in the education sector, Novonekrasovsk). The planes that periodically cause a "bang" both in Novonekrasovsk and in Yuzhny Sokol have become as familiar a part of life as the letter Z on public transport is for Krasnodar residents.

Our researcher had to deal with this herself. On her first day in Yuzhny Sokol, she heard loud sounds that sounded like explosions, but quickly noticed that no one attached any importance to them. In a taxi a little while later, the researcher, as usual, asked the driver whether the proximity of the special operation zone could be felt in the city. "Well, sometimes you can hear it over here," he admitted. But then he reassured her: the morning sounds of "explosions" were just "a military aircraft breaking the sound barrier."

Residents of Yuzhny Sokol demonstrated particular confidence in their security, even compared to people in Krasnodar and Novonekrasov. For example, once our researcher was tempted by an ad for a free massage, and thought to use the opportunity to ask the therapist about life in the city during their session. Beginning, as always, with her question about whether the war could be felt within the city, she heard the usual answer: no, said the interlocutor, no one talks or thinks about war, "just like everywhere else, people come here to kick back and relax," "and we're not intimidated, so we have no fear." And 33-year-old civil servant Natalya, whom our researcher met during a walk in the city park of Yuzhny Sokol and asked for a short interview, expressed her confidence that there was nothing threatening the city, since military units are located nearby: "Because it is protected, of course, nothing will fly over. One hundred percent!"

Our interlocutors in Krasnodar Krai talk about war as something distant that doesn't affect their everyday lives ("they don't call us up," "it doesn't reach us"), and something ordinary, a familiar part of everyday life ("drones fall everywhere"). This paradoxical perception of war allows them to live with the situation.

***

Krasnodar Krai is one of the most prosperous regions in Russia from an economic standpoint, and perhaps the most prosperous region geographically. The warm waters of two seas lap at its shoreline and its temperate climate and fertile soil draw people from all over. At the same time, there is another distinct feature of its geographical location: the region borders Abkhazia to the south and Crimea to the west. In other words, it is a border territory. In 2008, the residents of the region found themselves suddenly close to military action, and since February 2022, another war has been raging very close by. Although the vast majority of our interlocutors do not have friends or relatives who have been killed at the front, they all know someone who went to fight. Nevertheless, the war is usually not a cause for concern for them: they feel safe and far from the fighting. This, however, does not mean that the so-called "special operation" does not affect their lives in any way. For example, many of our interlocutors expressed notes of anxiety associated with their concerns about an unclear future.

The war creeps into the cultural space of the region—but cautiously. At large citywide events, military themes are almost never mentioned, and local events themed around the special operation

attract a narrow, interested audience. In the regional capital, we encountered a lot of pro-war propaganda, and in museums across all three cities, we found exhibitions dedicated to the heroes of the special operation. But in a year and a half, local residents have become so accustomed to this that they simply stopped paying attention. Krasnodar lives an ordinary, very rich life: it's bustling with tourists, bright posters on the streets of the city offer an extensive cultural milieu, cafes and restaurants cater to visitors who sit out on the summer verandas, on the main avenue on weekends, street musicians play and passers-by gather round, moving to the rhythm of the music. Small towns in the region also live an ordinary life: Yuzhny Sokol also entertains tourists, while the less touristy Novonekrasovsk lives a quiet, familiar life.

We often caught ourselves thinking that residents of Krasnodar Krai do not want to talk or think about the war, but the war makes itself known every now and then: the airport closed, prices have risen, one godmother's son was sent to the front, a neighbor received a funeral notice, the class teacher at school asked school children chip in for medicines for the front, a church offered to take part in weaving nets, and a drone fell on a neighboring street. It is impossible not to notice any of this, but you can try with all your might "not to think about it"—which is what many of our interlocutors do.

3.4 Chapter 4. "It's as if there is no war": similarities and differences in everyday military life in the three regions

Krasnodar and Ulan-Ude, Cheryomushkin, Udurgh, Yuzhny Sokol and Novonekrasovsk are all cities of different sizes, scattered across the map of Russia, poor and not so poor, located far and near to the front: could there be something in common in how their residents are experiencing the so-called "special operation" that has dragged on for years? Surprisingly, this similarity is immediately obvious: people everywhere are trying to live a normal life and ignore the war. They do not discuss the war with each other without necessity and brush off researchers and their questions: the war is far away, it does not concern us. At the same time, when it is no longer possible to ignore what is happening—for example, when someone they know dies or drone shrapnel hits a building on a nearby street—they try in every possible way to present what is happening as the norm, and not something out of the ordinary. There are drones falling everywhere, they say, and there is always a war going on.

There are different circumstances that can force the residents of these cities to feel and cope with the nearness of the war. This sense of nearness is influenced by such geographical factors as, for example, the number of military units (Buryatia) and penal colonies (Cheremushkin) from which prisoners are recruited, or the proximity to the combat zone (Krasnodar Krai). However, no less important are such social factors such as how tight-knit the community is, how news arrives from the front and is circulated, or the number of deaths in a particular area.

In all three regions, the war is spoken about less and less in public places and during city-organized events. In Cheryomushkin, visual references to the war have almost completely disappeared over the past year—there are not even military recruitment posters or flyers. In Ulan-Ude and Udurgh, there is also little to remind us that the country has been in a state of military conflict for the second year. In the cities of Krasnodar Krai, which is located closest to the combat zone, there is still a lot of Z-symbolism, but even here, this has waned over the past year. These small differences can be explained by external factors—for example, the diligence of local authorities and the size of the regional budget. At the same time, the amount of visual references to the war depends on the initiative of the city residents themselves: for example, in Cheryomushkin and in the cities of Krasnodar Krai, people themselves began to get rid of pro-war stickers on their cars. In none of the cities did we find anti-war statements in the form of graffiti, stickers or inscriptions, although, for example, from the Telegram channel "Visible Protest" we know that such statements did sometimes pop up in the past.

In all three regions, consciously or not, public event organizers avoided mentioning the war. Most often, public events were held according to familiar patterns and, according to the researchers' impressions, were almost no different from similar events in peacetime. At the same time, in each region, among the organizers and participants of the events, there were enthusiasts who were fascinated by the topic of war due to personal passions or professional interests. Thus, in Cheryomushkin, Father Konstantin held pro-war prayers, and in Yuzhny Sokol, local poets inspired by the war gathered for a cultural event in the library. Such events and associations resemble "interest clubs" that gather their particular audience, but do not influence the overall picture. Meanwhile, in

Buryatia, ”Father’s Day” turned out to be a recognizably pro-war event. It attracted an unexpectedly large number of people and evoked an emotional response from them. Perhaps this happened because the organizers of the event, despite all its officialdom, were able to respond to the request to glorify not only the dead, but also their relatives.

In Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Buryatia, we observed the largest number of active volunteer initiatives aimed at helping the army. However, this may be partly explained by the fact that these were the only regions where our researchers visited large, capital cities. At the same time, it can be assumed that there are special reasons that make pro-war volunteering popular in these two regions. In Krasnodar Krai, it is probably connected with the geographical proximity of the war: for example, it is logistically more convenient to locate aid collection points near the front, and the aid itself feels less ephemeral when its recipients are nearby. And in Buryatia, even opponents of the war who feel the need to help “their own kind” participate in the military assistance efforts due to a pronounced local identity, a large number of locals serving in the military, and strong social ties. In both regions, military volunteering helps people feel a sense of belonging to a community and overcome the feeling of helplessness associated with the war and its consequences.

Economic and social inequality affects not only how people perceive war, but also their behavior. For example, the poorer the region, the less participation in the military is seen as a choice. In Buryatia, a subsidized region with a large number of military units, high unemployment, and low salaries, our interlocutors see signing a contract and serving in a combat zone as an alternative to seasonal work or no work at all. In the more prosperous, but still quite poor Cheryomushkin, war is also often spoken of as work—but unattractive work, where even a relatively high salary does not cover the associated risks. The fact that military service is spoken of so critically indicates that people in Cheryomushkin, unlike many residents of Buryatia, have a sense of choice. In the more prosperous Krasnodar region, people themselves admit that relative economic well-being leaves them with the choice to participate (“when you have sausage in the fridge, you don’t really want to fight”) and express gratitude to those who are sitting in the trenches “in their place.”

The civilian relationship to the government and authorities distinguishes Buryatia from other regions and influences the content of conversations about the war. In Krasnodar, Yuzhny Sokol, Novonekrasovsk and Cheryomushkin, in their communications with one another, people periodically complain about the behavior of the authorities and abstract ”powers that be” who send their fellow citizens to die. Residents of both regions openly talk about the insufficient supplies of the Russian army, which is why mobilized soldiers and their families have to spend their own money to buy uniforms and necessary items. In Buryatia, even in situations where our researcher tried to bring up problems with supplies or mortality, people avoided discussing these topics. The state seems to many residents of Buryatia to be a protector and helper, and also to be the one who transforms the dead into heroes and ensures that their deaths were not in vain.

However, despite the discontent with many aspects of the war expressed in Cheryomushkin and the cities of Krasnodar Krai, neither the death of Russian soldiers nor other events obviously related to the war and the actions of the Russian government (from the arrival of drones to rising prices) become grounds for residents who justify the war to criticize the state and look for those responsible for the war and the strife it has brought to Russia. For most of them, the war has become a familiar part of reality that does not require explanation or discussion. In a sense, the

war has ceased to be experienced as an event whose causes could be discussed and the course of which could be observed. Now, two years later, only when the effects of the war have impacted family, friends, the community, work, relationships does it evoke a genuine emotional response, although it continues to be perceived more as a natural cataclysm that has befallen society.

This page intentionally left blank.

4

Part 2. How Russians (don't) discuss the war in the new reality

4.1 Chapter 5. Perceptions of the war

When war becomes an increasingly familiar part of Russian society, perceptions of the war by the country's residents cannot help but change. From public opinion surveys we know, for example, that throughout 2023, the number of both confident supporters and confident opponents fell, while the number of people who avoid giving a definite answer about their attitude towards the war and people with no definite attitude increased. At the same time, research shows that even among confident opponents of the war, there are those who become increasingly loyal to the state over time, not because their views change, but because they want to live a normal life and grow tired of resisting. In other words, people become disillusioned with war and disillusioned with radical opposition to it, but this does not turn them into its opponents or supporters, but rather fills the so-called "gray zone." The "gray zone" is populated, on the one hand, by people with a vague, contradictory attitude to war, and on the other, by those who are not ready to talk about their attitude with unfamiliar researchers. In order to understand what is happening in this "gray zone," we need qualitative methods, for example, long conversations in which the war is not so much the focus as the background; and especially informal conversations that are not recorded on a tape recorder, during which people are much more open. This is the material of which our study consisted.

At the same time, the emergence of anti-war candidates Yekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin in political life on the eve of the elections awakened dissatisfied Russians. The huge lines of people waiting to vote for Nadezhdin as a write-in candidate clearly indicated this. The results of sociological surveys conducted before the 2024 elections also indicated this. The recognition and popularity of Nadezhdin and Vladislav Davankov grew steadily, because Russians tied their hopes for peace to these candidates. From February to March 2024, Nadezhdin's recognition increased from 38% to 45%, and Davankov's rose from 25% to 46%.

What do the contradictory trends seen in public opinion polls tell us about how Russians perceive the war? How can we understand the thoughts of those who avoid answering questions about their attitudes toward the war? Based on an analysis of qualitative data—interviews, focus groups,

and observations—we offer a more complex picture of how Russians perceive the war. How is the view of the war changing in Russian society almost two years after it began? What influences these changes? In this chapter, we will share with you a paradoxical observation: people who justify the war also criticize it constantly, and often quite harshly. How then do Russians who justify the war perceive it differently from those who are confidently opposed to it, if both are unhappy with the situation? And how do they coexist with each other in the new reality of contemporary Russia? This chapter provides answers to these and other questions.

4.1.1 Non-opponents

Who are the non-opponents? And how have their views changed over two years of war?

We conventionally call all those Russians who support the war, justify it, or distance themselves from giving an assessment non-opponents of the war. In other words, this category includes people with different attitudes toward the war (or even without a specific attitude toward it), but none of them are critics of the invasion of Ukraine.

What are the main trends in the dynamics of attitudes towards the war among non-opponents, according to public opinion polls? Polls by the Chronicle and ExtremeScan show that support for the war has been falling and the desire for peace has been growing throughout 2023. Thus, at the beginning of the war, the share of its "declarative supporters" was 63%, and then decreased and remained at 53% for most of 2023. But the group of "dodgers," that is, those who find it difficult or refuse to answer the question about their attitude towards the war, grew, increasing from 28% to 36% during 2023.

This trend seemed to start changing in June 2024. A spring wave of surveys conducted by different teams showed an increase in support for the war. According to experts at the Re:Russia portal, this growth can be explained by an improvement in social sentiment in society or by increased confidence in Russia's advantage on the battlefield. The results of our qualitative research provide an in-depth picture of changes in the perception of the war by non-opponents.

Our research began with doubts about whether the overwhelming majority of Russians fully support the "special operation." Two years later, as we look at those who do not consider themselves opponents of the war, we ask ourselves similar questions. Can we say that confident war supporters are forming the majority in Russia? Can we confidently divide society into supporters and opponents? What exactly do those who declare support for the "special military operation" support?

Between criticism and justification

While previously we relied mainly on the interview method, which involves answering specific questions on the record, now, thanks to the ethnographic method, we were able to see how non-opponents of the war talk about it in an informal setting, and in different circumstances and contexts. These observations led us to an important methodological conclusion: while for opponents of the war (as well as confident supporters), changing the format of the conversation did not have a significant impact on their assessment of what was happening, for the majority of non-opponents,

their evaluations of the situation turned out to be directly dependent on the context and format of communication. Depending on what the researchers said, people switched between criticism and justification of the war.

The ethnographic method, coupled with interviews and focus groups, allowed us to draw an important conclusion about the dynamics of the perception of the political situation in the country and the war by non-opponents. Non-opponents, especially apolitical ones, began to criticize the war more, and at the same time feel a stronger connection with the country and the government waging this war. To put it simply, we could say that they became both more critical and more patriotic. At the same time, the combination of criticism and patriotism did not lead to a seemingly possible political synthesis, for example, in the form of critical patriotism along the lines of "I love my country so much, but I hate the government"—and below we explain why.

First, we will describe the "game" of criticizing and justifying the war and the logic behind switching between these two modes of speech. In this description, we will rely primarily on ethnographic diaries, mainly on the diary from the trip to Cheryomushkin. It was in Cheryomushkin that we first saw this unique combination of criticism and justification of the war. We were able to do this thanks to the original strategy of the researcher and her assistant, a local resident, Tonya, who were able to organize and participate in many informal conversations about the war (the experimental nature of their actions is described in more detail in the chapter "Methodology"). Later, analyzing the entire corpus of data, we began to notice a similar combination of criticism and justification in materials from the other two fields.

Criticism of war: moral, economic, social, class

Over the two years of the war, something very important has changed in the way Russians receive information about it. At the beginning of the war, when discussing and justifying it, they were forced to rely primarily on news from the media. Over time, they have accumulated a wealth of personal observations and knowledge about the war that is not mediated by the press and social networks. They draw this new knowledge from their communications with those who were at the front, or with acquaintances of these people: by the end of the second year of the war, there were practically no people left in small towns who did not personally know someone who had fought in the war. And as a rule, when referring to more personal knowledge about the war that has not been mediated by the press, our interlocutors, who are generally *loyal to the authorities, criticized the war*, contrasting this knowledge ("truth") with the official television narrative ("lies and propaganda"). For example, a 43-year-old female museum worker from the town of Cheryomushkin expresses her frustration in an interview:

> "I still know some boys who are over there, and **they tell me things that they don't show or talk about on television, of course**. Four months ago, this boy came home, really young, just 20 years old, came to visit someone I know. <...> He directly [said that] what we watch and see is not there. And they see it all, they know it all. He said: 'Don't believe what they say on TV. It's not true. **Everything they show there is a lie**.' At one time, there was talk about Artemovsk, that we had seized it. 'We haven't advanced at all, we're retreating. But they won't show you that,' he said. As they talk

> about it, everything is fine...ammunition, weapons—it's all there. Even yesterday we talked – they have everything. But they buy all the equipment with their own money. **The state doesn't give it to them**, like 'we gave you everything [you need]'—but they gave nothing."

Thus, this discontent with the war is based on new facts that people learn about personally from talking to their friends. These facts are given the legitimacy of being "true," as opposed to the lies on television. As it accumulates, personal knowledge about the war becomes the subject of conversations and gossip. These conversations give birth to ***moral criticism*** of wartime society—that is, statements by people who critically evaluate the behavior of others from the point of view of generally accepted norms. Russians who are not opponents of the war hand out such assessments left and right. Often these assessments concern the "immoral behavior" of women whose husbands are at the front or died there. We described the circulation of such assessments and gossip in the city of Cheryomushkin, Sverdlovsk Oblast, in detail in Chapter 1.1.

The habit of evaluating each other's behavior, the habit of moralizing becomes a sort of jumping off point for social criticism. In conditions where the risk of being called to the front is very present and people you know are fighting, criticism of the war is spawned from everyday, mundane conversations about the personal lives of our interlocutors. Thus, during one informal conversation in Cheryomushkin, nurse Zhanna complained about her husband's desire to go to the front: "I told him: 'You know that you have a young child, you have me. You'll go off, we won't have you anymore—what then? Who will raise your child?" She continued her reasoning along the lines that, of course, the child might have a new dad, but from her point of view, only the biological father would be a worthy father. In her experience, adoptive fathers often behave badly with their wives' children because "there are all sorts of crazy men." In other words, weighing the risks to her family due to her husband possibly leaving for the front, Zhanna, on the one hand, practically claims that war destroys families and on the other gives her assessments of the deviant behavior of other people. Conversations and gossip filled with such judgments turn into criticism of the war in other situations as well. For example—and again, we have already written about this in detail in the chapter devoted to Cheremushkin (see Chapter 1.1) —when discussing what is more important, the life of a loved one or money received from the state, our interlocutors (particularly the women), guided by the norms of universal morality, choose in favor of life.

These assessments and value comparisons can, in theory, lead to political criticism of the war. We know about this from statements made by the movement of wives of mobilized soldiers, a segment of which has transformed into an opposition and protest movement in recent months. Relatives of servicemen often say the same thing in their public criticism of the Russian authorities: 'We do not need your money handouts, bring our loved ones back from the front!' It can be assumed that the moral and political criticism of the Russian authorities by activists of the "Put' Domoi" ["The Road Home" in English] Movement is rooted in popular moralizing, which is widespread in a broad variety of social environments and populated areas in Russia.

People who justify the war overall may criticize various aspects ***from an economic standpoint***. An important point of contention among our interlocutors concerns the material aspect of participating in the war—equipment and training for those called up and sent to the front by

the state. Our interlocutors often complain that the costs of preparing mobilized (and volunteer) soldiers for military operations fall entirely on the shoulders of their family members. They have to procure and pay off the equipment and safety gear themselves, obtain food on the front line themselves, and even repair military equipment at their own expense. Thus, in one informal conversation, our researcher's interlocutor initially claimed that all his acquaintances who went to the front were generally satisfied with their payments. However, he immediately recalled a specific acquaintance who, although he also regularly received all payments, was forced to repair and fill up the car he drove during combat missions with gas at his own expense. This fact truly outraged our interlocutor.

Economic criticism of war is sometimes more than complaints about specific instances of goods being distributed unfairly. It concerns the social contract between citizens and the state that is being reformed in wartime: if you take our men, we expect that in exchange for our loyalty you will take care of their safety and our well-being. Thus, an elderly resident of Cheryomushkin, Lyubov Vasilyevna, sincerely justifies the "special operation" overall. At the same time, she does not consider it a patriotic, people's war. While at the beginning of the war she donated money to help the army and the front, a year and a half later she admitted that she did not do this on her own initiative, but at the insistent suggestion of the city administration, and also began to insist that the state leading them should sponsor the military actions. "They are fighting for the Motherland," she was indignant in one of her conversations with our researcher. "Why should I? My pension is small, and they increased my electricity bill. Add more to my paycheck—I'll help the soldier."

Many of our interlocutors are representatives of underprivileged, economically vulnerable groups, and are residents of small and poor settlements. While speaking to them, we periodically heard ***social criticism*** of the war. The focus of this criticism is social issues. During one casual gathering in Cheryomushkin, the participants started talking about the Afghan war and whether Russia should have participated. Vitya suddenly became indignant, saying that the disabled veterans of the Afghan war did not receive anything from their government. "That's what I'm saying, there's no sense in this. There's no sense in any war! People have to start begging, they have no arms, no legs, for fuck's sake," he continued. "Those who sit higher up have no sense. Land, schmand, for fuck's sake, it's all about money! War is about money, money laundering, that's it!" Vitya, a young man from the working class, who generally supports the "special operation," at the same time criticizes it. War, from his point of view, breeds poverty and social insecurity on a national scale. These are the forms of oppression that Vitya and people like him experience in their own lives. It is not surprising that in these critical statements we see the figures of the victims of war, the poor, and the beneficiaries of war—the elite, as well as the figure of the state, which does not care about its citizens.

Participants in focus groups conducted jointly with the Chronicles and ExtremScan often said that the "special operation" had deepened the gap between the people and the government. "The gap between the government and the people is huge," said one of the participants in a focus group in Samara. Speaking about how the relationship between the state and citizens changes during war, another informant, also from Samara, added: "They have their own society at the top, and they make the decisions and govern things from there."

Indeed, such criticism of the war may not be just moralizing. Sometimes it may sound sharp and be directed against the state. In the same conversation, previously mentioned Vitya expressed his indignance about why deputies and generals don't send their sons to the front. "Many would go for Prigozhin, because the Russian government needs to be cleaned out. All these goddamned deputies are completely fucking unnecessary!"

An important conclusion follows from these critical judgments, which permeate the rather eclectic statements that our informants made about the war. The Russian authorities have failed to explain these goals—that is why critical statements made by non-opponents often have a questioning tone. "What are we fighting for?" they say. Or: "What do they want from all this?" etc., emphasizing how opaque official explanations of the meaning behind the "special operation" are. For example, nurse Zhanna from Cheryomushkin expressed her outrage during a get-together with friends: "We are not fighting for anything, fucking hell. I don't understand it all. Why should our children, someone's sons, husbands, I don't know, shed blood? For what?"

Sometimes our interlocutors not only formulate these rhetorical questions, but also provide answers to them: the authorities and the elites ("they", "those at the top", "the powers that be") need this war, and they sacrifice the lives of ordinary Russians to divide land, money and weapons among themselves. Thus, according to Lyuda from Cheryomushkin, "Those pedophiles are divvying up the land among themselves, for fuck's sake! And our boys are sent out to fucking die just because they can't share!" And from the point of view of her colleague Marina, "this is a political war—politicians are fighting among themselves, laundering money, weapons, back and forth." Thus, in a sense, they are trying to say that the goals of the war and the interests of the "politicians" do not correlate with the interests of ordinary people. This interpretation of events is significant above all because it was not handed down from above (on the contrary, it is in fact revelatory of the idea of war as defensive and noble), but originated below, in the everyday conversations of ordinary Russians.

Thus, the critical statements about the war by those who justify the war overall are not only directed at individual aspects. Some of our interlocutors criticize the war in general, and also, albeit rarely, the Russian government. Such criticism, however, is not a political criticism of the course of the Russian government, it is rather a "class" criticism, contrasting the "elites" and the "ordinary people." Criticism of the war and the state, even when acute, does not become part of an anti-war political project; in other words, these people do not become opponents of the war.

Justification of war: We are not the aggressors, the aggressors are not us

Thus, in informal conversations, our war non-opponents often criticized the "special operation" for harming Russians, and specific follow-up questions reinforced this criticism. But whenever someone in the conversation asked a question like "Perhaps Russia shouldn't have started the war?" a significant number of non-opponents responded with emotionally revealing exclamations like "We didn't start it, they attacked us" or "We needed to, there was no other way!" In this way, we gained access to a variety of justifications for the war by non-opponents.

While admitting at one point in the conversation that they did not understand the meaning and purpose of the war, the next moment our interlocutors could say something completely opposite:

that the war had a very specific meaning and that everything happening was inevitable, with many prerequisites leading up to it in the past and present. For example, when our researcher in the Sverdlovsk Oblast spoke with Father Alexei and his wife Vera, Father Alexei, responding to the researcher's critical remark about the war, agreed with her. "For example, I now believe that we were hasty in starting the war, in every sense," he said. Alexei and Vera also agreed with the researcher that on the eve of the war in Russia there were only a handful of people who wanted to fight: "Nobody wanted it, nobody wanted it," they said one after the other. "But that didn't stop the war from starting," the researcher concluded. And then Father Alexei retorted: "But we didn't start the war!" "And now we are for peace," his wife added. And Father Alexei completed her thought: "But we must understand that there cannot be peace before victory. Peace can be a consequence of victory." In other words, Father Alexei and his wife Vera first admitted that Russia had been hasty in starting the war first and that the "brotherly" nations should not be at war, but when faced with the question of whether it was worth starting the war at all, they began to assert that Russia had not started and must win the war.

Mentioning the fact that Russia attacked Ukraine often makes our interlocutors who had just criticized the war, justify it as a defensive war, not an aggressive one. This is well demonstrated by a conversation with Larisa Semenovna, a retiree and Sunday school teacher in Cheryomushkin. During an informal conversation while meeting with our researcher, before the researcher asked for an interview, Larisa Semenovna said: "Okay, I'm actually against the war. Well, what can I do about it now?" In the interview, she began to justify the war:

> Q: What do you think, if we had not sent in troops on the 24th, what would have happened?
>
> A: Hard to say. But again, historically—there's Richard Sorge, do you know this intelligence officer? How many times did he say that they were going to attack? They didn't pay attention, the non-aggression pact was signed. They waited...**So maybe it's better to get ahead of it?**
>
> Q: I don't know, it's a hypothetical situation.
>
> A: The thing is that history is always "if only," in the hypothetical. Especially since now the Lugansk and Donetsk Republics are part of Russia, and **our troops are not advancing, they are defending it all**.

At the same time, the set of specific arguments justifying the war remains the same—we have written about it previously. People explain the war by saying that it was a step toward protecting the residents of Donbass from Ukraine, or, even more often, Russia from the NATO threat. Thus, previously mentioned Vitya, the same one who was indignant that politicians and generals did not send their children to war, and then declared that "there is no point to the war," during one of the friendly disputes about the meaning of the war, reasoned, as if defending himself: "What do you mean, what are we fighting for? Well, initially there was a conversation that the Americans were supposed to occupy the territory of Ukraine, put their missiles there." Artyom agreed with him, confirming that "if Ukraine joins NATO, then America can put missiles closer to Moscow." One way or another, we can say that the justification of the war and its criticism are, as it were,

two different communication modes, between which our interlocutors constantly switch during spontaneous conversation.

It is impossible to understand the logic behind what is, at first glance, such paradoxical behavior from non-opponents, if we only analyze their justifications of the war based on their content, especially considering that the set of specific arguments to justify the war remains the same. Firstly, these arguments can chaotically alternate with each other in a single person's speech. This interchangeability of arguments hints at the fact that they are used arbitrarily and are not elements of an established and reflected picture of the world. Secondly, our interlocutors voice these arguments uncertainly or even directly indicate that they doubt their words. Continuing the conversation with Vitya and Artyom, the researcher decided to provoke the young men, carefully stating that it seems like Russia is coming into Ukraine and imposing its own order there, that is, our army behaves "like gangsters." The researcher, however, immediately made a reservation that she does not want to say anything bad about Russia, but is simply trying to understand the situation. "No, I understand," Artyom replied conciliatorily, "I agree. There are a lot of things that are incomprehensible to each of us."

Such doubts and willingness to agree with seemingly opposite statements are not surprising, given that many of our interlocutors are not knowledgeable in politics. The reality of war for them is divided into two parts: an incomprehensible geopolitical part and a more understandable one, connected with the impact of war on the everyday lives of themselves and their loved ones—for example, the mobilization, the separation of families, injuries and deaths. "Well, you see, this has been kind of building up for a long time. But that's not the point... The most offensive thing is that children are left without fathers, mothers without sons, wives," Artyom complained during one of the friendly get-togethers in Cheryomushkin. In other words, more reliable, and critical, knowledge about war is opposed to a less reliable ("kind of"), but "political" argument about the inevitability of war. If studying the content of our interlocutors' arguments is not enough to understand the logic behind their seemingly arbitrary switching between criticizing the war and justifying it, then what should we analyze? It is important to track how, and most importantly, why, these arguments are used by people in live, informal conversations. At what point does criticism of the war end and justification begin? What provokes such a switch? How can one simultaneously criticize war as destructive and senseless and justify it as meaningful? Why do even people who doubt their own arguments or directly claim that they do not understand the goals and meaning of war justify it, and often quite emotionally?

To answer these questions, it is worth taking another close look at how non-opponents criticize the war and comparing it to how confident opponents criticize the war. Anti-war criticism presents the war with Ukraine as criminal, where the criminals are primarily the political and military leadership of Russia, and, in some versions, Russian soldiers. Criticism of the war by apolitical Russians excludes the interpretation of the war as a crime, where there is a culprit and a victim. For them, the war is a struggle of equal political actors who "divide" lands, "launder" money, and "produce" weapons. If this war has victims, then in the eyes of the non-opponents they are, first of all, the ordinary citizens of Russia who are dying because of the ambitions of the powers that be. In other words, the criticism of the opponents of the war is directed at the relationship between

nation states, and the criticism of its non-opponents is directed at the relationship between the state and society.

Accordingly, when those speaking to non-opponents (our researchers, for instance) emphasize the harm that the Russian government is inflicting upon its *own* citizens by continuing the "special operation," non-opponents seize on this criticism. On the contrary, when others emphasize Russia's responsibility or, even more so, guilt before Ukraine, non-opponents begin to justify Russia's actions.

A brief exchange about the meaning of the war during an informal dinner party in Cheryomushkin illustrates this idea well. Our researcher's key interlocutor and opponent of the war, Tonya, started talking about yet another mobilized soldier who had recently returned home in a coffin. She accused the Russian military leadership of forcing young people to go to war in their place. Her remark provoked a fiery speech from Lyuda: "They're sending children to fight! For what?! I just can't understand this policy at all—what do they want from all this?!" The researcher, being an anti-war activist, responded with what she thought was the logical suggestion from this speech. "So maybe we should just withdraw our troops tomorrow and end this?" she said. But Lyuda suddenly began to aggressively defend Russia's actions: "The US, they're beating up civilians!" she shouted. "They're just killing civilians and blaming it all on Russia! And with all this, it's not true, for fuck's sake!"

It can be assumed that, unable to oppose the authoritarian state that unleashed the war (and unable to influence it and stop the war), *our interlocutors take such accusations personally and therefore move from criticism to justification of the war*. This need for justification does not stem from adherence to political ideologies, for example, the nationalist idea of Russia's infallibility, but from *universal human morality that condemns mass violence*.

The importance to many non-opponents of justifying the war to themselves—that is, clearing their own names from accusations of immoral violence—is demonstrated by the dialogue between our researcher and Father Valentin, which took place in the suburbs of Cheryomushkin. Our researcher shared her opinion that human deaths are always a tragedy, be they the deaths of Russians or Ukrainians. And there was a reason she voiced this thought to Father Valentin—it seemed to her that a clergyman should value the importance of human life and the principle of "thou shalt not kill" more than anyone else. "Look," the researcher said, "people live in the city of Kharkiv, for example, and suddenly a war begins, there are battles, people are dying." "**We are not to blame for that**," Father Valentin suddenly replied, although the researcher did not raise the question of guilt or responsibility. "Those who unleashed this war are to blame, the devil did it." The researcher made another attempt: "But many civilians, children and old people, women, innocent people, are dying over there." "Look, **we are not to blame for that**, we do not kill civilians."

Just like the fact that criticism by non-opponents does not become an anti-war political stance, justification of the war doesn't become a pro-war political stance. For example, despite the abundance of arguments and explanations justifying the meaning of the military hostilities to which our interlocutors refer, none of these explanations are related to any clear image of victory in the war. Statements by non-opponents about the outcome of the war being favorable for Russia are abstract and vague. For example, when our researcher asked Vitya and Artyom's opinions during a group get-together in Cheryomushkin about when and how the war might end, Vitya confidently

answered: "We will have victory, that's it." "And what does this victory look like?" the researcher clarified, and in response she heard: "Who the fuck knows. We'll just occupy Ukraine and that's it."

The Russian government has failed to explain the meaning of the war to its citizens during the course of the "special operation." After almost two years of war, many Russians have not come to understand the prerequisite events or goals any better. This idea was well formulated by one of the participants in a focus group in Samara:

> "Let's be honest, if he says: 'Okay, guys, we have a goal,' remember, we always had five-year plans in the Soviet Union—in our five-year plan we do this, in the next five-year plan we do that. But we don't know what for. **We don't understand why, what's next for us, what are we fighting for, what are we, what are we striving for?** Or how long will it take to finish this, 5 years, in 10, in 20, in 50? We don't know any deadlines, no plans, nothing."

Thus, we see that despite the growing criticism of the war, non-opponents continue to justify the war, sometimes quite emotionally. In part, the justification of the war is driven by the desire to justify Russia, which violated the norms of generally accepted morality by invading Ukraine.

Patriotism, but not imperialism

Despite the fact that criticism of the war does not turn into an anti-war stance and justifications of the war by this same group does not turn into a consistently pro-war position, there is something that gives their view a certain integrity. Whatever their assessment of the war, when discussing it, non-opponents often discuss not only their own families, but also Russia as a whole. In criticizing the war, our interlocutors focus on specific people and families suffering from the war. However, for some, this criticism leads to generalization. They come to the conclusion that it harms Russians and Russia: the war destroys families, leads to deaths and forces the state to increase budget spending on defense to the detriment of social assistance and the country's economic development. At the same time, when justifying the war, they insist that it is being waged in order to protect Russia from threats or to transform it through reforms caused by the war. For example, during a girl's gathering in Cheryomushkin, one participant, Lyuda, was said in frustration: "The US, they're beating up civilians!" Then she started shouting: "They're just killing civilians and blaming it all on Russia! Do you understand what they're doing, those motherfuckers?" According to our researcher's observations, Lyuda especially emphasized the word "Russia": "They're just killing civilians and blaming it all on Russia! And with all this, it's not true, for fuck's sake!"

The fact is that the fighting at the front and the changes taking place in the rear are forcing people living in Russia to rethink their own relationships with their homeland. We have already suggested that the transition from criticizing the war to justifying it in informal conversations is often caused by the desire to restore the moral status of the country waging war. In these cases, people are not always ardent patriots who feel a sense of belonging to some community. In other words, when defending Russia, they do not rely on increased social solidarity, on new horizontal

connections, but defend an undefined "us" that exists by default due to the passport people hold—they defend it because this "us" is threatened by stigmatization due to accusations of military aggression.

Others we spoke to say they are seeing a rise in patriotic solidarity. One of them, a 32-year-old female teacher from the village of Udurgh in Buryatia, says in an interview:

> Q: In general, have guys' attitudes towards the army and military contracts in any way in connection with recent events?
> A: They have become more patriotic. They have become deeply patriotic. Even at our school, for example: the flag is raised every Monday, they sing the anthem, they stand and sing. And I watch their facial expressions, I observe them. They are so serious about everything, everything….

Thus, in the minds of some, the "special military operation," which is a tragedy, nevertheless also has positive consequences—the strengthening of what is called in scientific literature "banal nationalism" or "banal patriotism," that is, national identity, which does not necessarily imply involvement in a nationalist political project, a "fiery" feeling of commitment to a particular political ideology or a sense of belonging to the country. But what types of this kind of identity are developing in wartime Russia?

A minority of people we spoke to who justify the war demonstrate ***ideological patriotism***—in other words, they reproduce the official Kremlin ideology about the "Western threat" of the Kremlin elites. For example, a 37-year-old female museum employee from Yuzhny Sokol reasons in an interview:

> "If we're talking about the special operation, my opinion is that Putin has said many times: remove your bases, do not come close to our borders. Why are you doing this? Why did they take on Ukraine? **I think that the Maidan in Ukraine, all of this was done by the hands of you-know-who**. Therefore, he's simply not allowing it. There were similar attempts in Belarus as well, and in Russia—take Bolotnaya Square. **They are always trying to destabilize all things. For me, it is all too obvious**."

It's important to note, however, that even in the ideologized versions of patriotism, we encounter references to the randomness, the constructed nature of patriotic views. We call this phenomenon "spontaneous social constructivism." "Social constructivism" in the social sciences is the thesis that many phenomena of human life that seem natural to us are in fact formed by social institutions. For example, a wide variety of gender-related differences seem inherent to us, given by nature, but in fact, say social constructivists, it is society that teaches us through upbringing that there are "male" and "female" professions or character traits. Some of our interviewees and interlocutors can act as spontaneous sociologists and social constructivists in the way they explain themselves. Often they do not insist on the truth or ideological nature of their views and opinions, but rather say: I think so because I was brought up this way. For example, a former 45-year-old civil servant from Cheryomushkin discusses her sense of patriotism in an interview:

> "They say that in the 90s there was no patriotism. There was patriotism, and we were all on that...I don't know. **They taught me**...For example, the Russian anthem is playing, let's say, I don't know. Do you cry? Because I just break out in tears…I basically can't do it any other way. Because I worked in the government, because the **concept of subordination and orders was kind of instilled in me**."

Another interviewee, a 36-year-old resident of Krasnodar, also explains her own patriotism and support for the "special operation" not by the truth of her political convictions or the naturalness of her love for her homeland, but by her socialization:

> Q: And when it [the war] started on the first day, you told me how it went. What about your emotions?
> A: Mine? Oh, I have various emotions. Again, I am against war, of course, yes. But I **was raised** in a military family. My father is an officer, my brother is an officer <…> I mean, I was also **raised like that**, my grandfather died in the war in the first days of the war. My mother's father. My second grandfather—he served on the border. True, he died of typhoid fever, but nevertheless he fought the Basmachi. **That is, in my understanding, for a man—it is his sacred duty to protect us, the Motherland** and all that stuff.

In conditions where patriotism is more of an identity than an idea, its driving force becomes not faith, but everyday practice. Often people are imbued with patriotic feelings not so much because of faith in a specific political idea, but as a result of participation in collective action and through contact with material objects of national and historical significance. We call this phenomenon ***performative patriotism***, meaning that this brand of patriotism grows not from an idea but from action, from practice ("performance"). Thus, a 50-year-old Orthodox female volunteer from Cheryomushkin says in an interview:

> "This history—**you pick up this stone** and you know that thousands of people have passed over it. You go up to the bell tower of the cathedral, these bricks—just imagine, people were walking on them 300, 200 years ago. This, **I believe, gives a sense of patriotism**, that you live in a country where thousands lived before you, they did this with their own hands before you. And you, what can you accomplish today?"

Our ethnographic trip to Buryatia allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of performative patriotism during wartime. In these settlements, women whose relatives are at the front organize themselves into volunteer movements to weave camouflage nets and sew uniforms for the military. In the course of this practice itself, solidarity between people is formed, which is understood as patriotic. It is often associated with the memory of Soviet society, but not because our interlocutors see in modern Russia an ideological or political continuation of the Soviet project. Rather, the practice of volunteering itself is reminiscent of Soviet factory labor, in the process of which the Soviet people were formed. For example, when our researcher, working shoulder to shoulder with volunteers in Ulan-Ude, asked if she could pour herself some coffee, one of them, Saina, answered: "The coffee is there, pour it! Everything here is neighborly, like in

a communal apartment, like in the Soviet Union!" From time to time, these same volunteers joked about "socialist competition"—they worked so quickly and efficiently, as if they were participating in such a competition. In thinking that they were doing something important, the volunteers felt like important members of the national community. And since the state helps the volunteers and partly organizes their activities, this activity itself strengthens the feeling of a collective connection with the state, the representative of the national community by default.

The unprincipled patriotism of wartime reflects an important ideological feature of perceptions of the war by non-opponents. Unlike the Russian political elite, which considers Ukraine an inferior state to which Russia "gifted" its historical lands, ordinary Russians live in a world of nation-states, not in an imperial space. Living in a world of nation-states means living in a world of national borders, which are conceived as legitimate and immutable. It is these borders that "block" the imperial imagination. However, it should be noted that although the overwhelming majority of the people we spoke to do not share the Kremlin's imperialist ideology, they do reproduce imperialist language from time to time. Some of them, for example, may say that Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, or even Kievan Rus'—or insist on the legitimacy of Russia's imperial claims, as does, for example, a 43-year-old female museum worker from Cheryomushkin:

> "For all this to end, the other side needs to admit defeat, admit that we are right. We are **fighting for our territories, for our cities**. For them to say that's it, let's go to negotiations, and for all this to end."

Nevertheless, our interviewees and interlocutors have poor mastery of imperialist discourse. If they speak two languages—imperialism and nationalism—then the language of nationalism is their native language, and the language of imperialism is foreign, and they have clearly skipped most of their classes. For the overwhelming majority of our interlocutors, the Russo-Ukrainian war is not a "war for historical lands" or an "operation to liberate a brotherly people from the Nazis," but a global war between an alliance of nation states with Russia as a nation state. "We just have one country. And all the countries are fighting against us," says Artyom from Cheryomushkin, whom we already know, while explaining why the war has lasted so long.

The ethnographic method allowed us to see, among other things, that the Kremlin's imperialist idea that Russians and Ukrainians are one people is poorly understood by non-opponents. Although they justify the "special operation," they often cannot bring themselves to call eastern Ukrainians or residents of Donbass "Russians," and then they use the phrase "Russian-speaking." For example, during an argument about the meaning of the war between our researcher, her friend Tonya, a woman with anti-war views, and Vitya and Artyom, who justify the war, Vitya predictably blamed Ukraine: "Why have they been mocking our people since 2014?" he said angrily. "It's their people too," the researcher retorted. "They are supposedly a Russian-speaking people," Artyom supported his friend, as we can see, calling the people of Ukraine "Russian-speaking," and not "Russian."

In non-opponents' criticism of the war, we see the same division between Russians and Ukrainians, and even more so, the identification of Donbass residents with Ukraine. One time, our researcher in Krasnodar Krai got into a taxi and, as usual, started talking to the driver about whether

the proximity of war was felt around them. Gradually, the conversation turned to the topic of mobilization and the taxi driver's potential of ending up at the front. "I don't want to," the taxi driver said. "And who am I defending it from? I don't understand at all." And then he added: "They aren't defending it themselves, they're going to Ukraine, those who live in the DPR and LPR. So they'll come here and I'll go fight instead of them? I don't need that." In other words, like many others, he does not consider the residents of Donbass to be part of Russia—quite the opposite, for him they are part of Ukraine, a national state opposing Russia. In other words, in his case, patriotic, or, if you like, nationalistic reasoning about national borders prevails over imperial thinking in terms of the "Russian world," which is located outside these borders and is therefore capable of changing them.

Another interlocutor, a 41-year-old male transport worker from Krasnodar, contrasts his own patriotism in an interview with the Kremlin's desire to redraw national borders. However, he does not formulate any alternative idea of critical patriotism and, on the contrary, refers to the fact that he is far from politics. Speaking about the territories seized by Russia, he says:

> "I'm not a politician, I'm not an economist <...> [And] **I'm not a citizen of these territories, I can't consider them my people—they're not**. They're not my kin, not my blood, they're not my people <...> **If my homeland is taken away from me, I will fight for it**. There are people, and I understand these people, who consider it theirs. And other people think that 'it was yours, now it is mine.' I do not understand this. It is incomprehensible to me—how is this possible? Now, if you go to any person's home and say: 'You get out of here, I'm going to live here.'"

It is important to note that those who consider Ukraine an aggressive opponent of Russia do not say that Ukrainians are just stupider versions of Russians and that the Ukrainian state is defective (as the official ideology of the Kremlin often states). On the contrary, they emphasize that Ukraine is not Russia, perhaps that is why it is dangerous for Russia. For example, in an informal conversation with our researcher, Elena, a realtor from Krasnodar, emphasizes: "For me, Russia is Russia, and Ukraine—I have relatives there who hated us before the military operation had even begun and did not want to communicate with us, that's a fact."

Thus, regardless of whether Ukraine is presented as an enemy or a victim, whether it evokes sympathy or aggression, it is thought of by the majority of the people we spoke to as a separate, independent state.

Ethnographic observations allowed us to see how nationalist discourse interacts with —and displaces—imperialist discourse in real time. Our interlocutors seem to correct themselves in favor of the common sense of nation states existing within national borders, rather than an imperial frontier that crosses these borders. For example, during a get-together at the home of our researcher's key interlocutor in Cheryomushkin, one guest, nurse Zhanna, complained that instead of "victory," "coffins come every month, and not just once a month." War, in her words, "is not a victory, it is a human defeat, a person is killing himself, a Russian is killing a Russian." In addition to the primacy of understandable morality ("human") over incomprehensible politics ("victory"), which we wrote about above, we see here the language of imperial nationalism. Zhanna meant that Ukrainians are also Russians, and therefore in the current war "a Russian is killing a Russian."

However, Zhanna immediately corrected herself, demanding: ”Russia, well, withdraw all your troops, so we can see who is beating whom? Maybe they are beating themselves up? This is their war among themselves.” Zhanna unexpectedly voiced not only an anti-war call to withdraw troops from the territory of Ukraine, but also contrasted Russia with Ukraine. She interpreted the war in Donbass not as a ”civil war between Russians and Russians,” but as an intra-Ukrainian conflict that should not concern Russia. She ended her monologue with the words: ”Ukrainians are a separate people. What are we fighting for? Because Zelensky has gone crazy? Why did Putin even bother to defend us?”

Although both imperial and nationalist rhetoric are used by our interlocutors, nationalist rhetoric is used much more frequently and more confidently, and “displaces” the imperial rhetoric. This means that the language of nationalism is more deeply rooted in their common sense, and is more credible than the imperial language. At the same time, support for Russia in its war with Ukraine may lead to the Russian national identity “expanding” to imperialism, and then imperial nationalism seems to absorb and incorporate nationalism that refers to the borders of the nation state. One interlocutor, a 59-year-old retiree from Krasnodar, says in an interview that in the period from 2014 to 2022, her acquaintances considered Ukraine not just a separate, but even a distant country, but with the beginning of a full-scale war, she, recalling the words of her acquaintances, does not agree with them and questions the inviolability of the national border:

> ”Of course, we all know that it [the war in Donbass] was not particularly advertised here, they always somehow distanced themselves. Well, it’s there—in Ukraine. It’s somewhere over there. And where is ‘over there’ exactly? Generally by our border. It’s basically right next to us. Just stretch out your hand and there it is.”

This supporter of the “special operation” records a change in the way people in her social circle view Ukraine. At first, they thought of Ukraine as a separate country, opposing Russia, and then they began to think of it as the outskirts of Russia. Thus, there was a transition from a nationalist picture of the world to an imperialist one. It is no coincidence that the interview with her is filled with imperialist rhetoric. “Ukrainians,” she says, “they...they are not a people as such, as a nationality, they are, in principle, Cossacks. Right? They are an ethnic group.” Why are some interlocutors sensitive to the imperialist language and assimilate it? Is it because of their higher education, which forms a unique taste for “big” political ideologies? Or maybe, at least in the example given above, it is also because they live near a national border, and it is easier for them to mentally “step over” it? Future research should provide answers to these questions.

Thus, the idea that Russian society thinks like the Kremlin and Putin is wrong. Quite the contrary: even those who are not against the war think about it in terms of harm or benefit for Russia as a nation-state within the 1991 borders (usually with the addition of Crimea), and not as an empire. At the same time, in some cases, nationalist discourse can mutate into imperialist discourse.

A hope for peace and dreams of democracy?

Neither criticism nor justification of war leads to the formation of a political position, either anti-war or pro-war. Does this mean that our interlocutors, who are not opponents of war, are doomed

to apathy and deprived of political subjectivity? Probably not. Even if Russians do not become opponents of war, some of them can gradually articulate a demand for peace based on their social criticism. And the lack of understanding of the goals and meaning of war makes the desire for peace even more persistent and urgent. Moreover, some of our interlocutors—albeit rarely—may desire not only peace, but also democratization.

This is what focus group data show. During the focus groups, we asked people questions that we did not ask in interviews or ethnographic conversations, about the presidential elections and what changes they might lead to. Some of our interlocutors—those who were going to vote for Putin in the elections in March 2024—explained their choice by the fact that Putin must end the war. Such a serious task requires a serious political leader in power. This logic is clearly visible in the focus groups:

> Q: Does anyone expect any changes [from the results of the presidential elections]?
> A 1: There will be changes, I think, when everything is over. Then, maybe, we will start something.
> A 2: The first thing we are waiting for is the end of the war, that's all. I personally am waiting for the end of the military operation." "I will go and vote for Putin. Why?
>
> Because **it all started under him, and he must finish it**."

Moreover, during our focus groups, some participants who were generally loyal to the current government and had resigned themselves to the reality of the war, but most importantly, did not have oppositional or protest experience, nevertheless discussed the advantages of competitive liberal democracy. They talked about how good it would be if there were many different parties and different politicians in Russia competing with each other—then people could make a political choice from a variety of political programs. Are these people really ideological supporters of the Western liberal democratic model? The point here is different: it seems to them that in a typical situation of political competition it is possible to solve those very concrete social issues that politicians living in their own world avoid solving. Thus, one of the focus group participants said:

> "**I like the history of Northern Europe in an ideal world, where there are many parties** with very different, often narrow interests, there are some parties for ecology, and that they are represented in the percentage in which they were elected <…> there is a huge deficit of interest in the regions, **a huge deficit**, as if you can **focus on different areas**, and you could just choose this. And in general, somehow influence the situation. This is also all the diversity."

In other words, not just supporters of the non-systemic opposition and protest rally participants, but also people without relevant experience can talk about the desirability of political competition, because for them, it is a necessary condition for solving the problems that concern them. Political diversity is an outlet for solving concrete political problems. Another participant in the Samara focus group reasons:

> ”I would also look at the candidate’s political platform, that is, let’s say he says: changes, I’m more interested in domestic policy, in other words, the candidate said, let’s say, developing the regions, less Moscow and St. Petersburg, more regional areas, changing the tax system, so that all our money doesn’t go to Moscow, but remains in the regions. That would interest me, for instance.”

The liberal democratic system is important for some of our non-opponent interlocutors, not from the point of view of diversity as an ideological principle, but because it “grounds” politics in the interests of the people and makes politics closer to the people. Again, a fragment from the Samara focus group:

> “A fresh perspective is definitely necessary, and again, a specific platform, precisely what will work for the people in the end, otherwise they’ll feed us tomorrow, always tomorrow. What about work, what subsidies will there be, what about the children, kindergartens, to finally solve the problem with housing and communal services there, to restore order?”

Thus, questions about elections and possible social changes made it possible to see that some of our interlocutors who are generally loyal to the authorities are ready to demand peace and would like to see the political system in Russia democratized.

***

By late fall 2023, non-opponents of the war have become more critical of the ”special operation,” but at the same time they continue to emotionally justify the war. Often, the justification of the war is not due to their political convictions, but rather the desire to restore the moral status of Russia, which has violated the norms of generally accepted morality by resorting to mass violence. However, neither criticism nor justification of the war makes most of our interlocutors political opponents or supporters of the war in the strict sense of the word. As before, most of them avoid political self-determination or taking a stance.

Both criticism and justification of the war by non-opponents are often conducted in the process of rethinking their own attitudes toward their native country. In the eyes of our interlocutors, the war is bad because it harms Russia, but it is necessary in order to protect it. At the same time, when speaking of “Russia,” they usually refer to the country within its internationally recognized borders (with the exception of Crimea, which they consider part of Russia), thereby demonstrating to us that they live in a world of nation-states, not empires—in which those who reside in the Kremlin live. Without taking a clear political position, some of our interlocutors are nevertheless sensitive to the issue of political change—they dream of peace and sometimes even democracy, which seems to be an effective way to solve specific social issues.

4.1.2 Opponents

Who are the opponents? And how have their views changed over two years of war?

Russians' support for and opposition to the so-called "special military operation" is regularly measured through public opinion polls. Since asking a direct question about support for the war would be normatively charged (everyone knows that the "correct" answer from the state's point of view is a positive one), many researchers insist that indirect questions are needed to understand attitudes toward the war. Accordingly, the definitions of support for and opposition to the war, opponents and supporters, differ from poll to poll. Nevertheless, the trends recorded by the three main polling companies studying attitudes toward the war—the Chronicles project (in conjunction with Extreme Scan), the Russian Field group, and the Levada Center—largely coincide. For example, among those who are close to being opponents of the war, however we define them, there are more women than men; more young people than old people; more people who consume information from Telegram and YouTube than from television.

The number of declarative opponents of the war, that is, those who answer negatively even when asked directly if they support the war, has remained virtually unchanged since the beginning of the invasion and, according to various polls, amounts to between 10% and 16% of the population of Russia. But this number in itself is uninformative, because due to repression, as well as social pressure from others, many people are simply not ready to answer negatively to such a question, even if they do not like the war. And this is not something we simply assume: recently, researchers have confirmed that the so-called "spiral of silence" is at work in Russia—a phenomenon in which those who hold an unpopular opinion in society do not dare to express it, and this only increases its non-representation. It turned out that Russians are generally reluctant to talk about the war with strangers, and opponents of the war share their opinions with polling agencies one and a half times less often than supporters. In other words, when asking a direct question about support for the war and measuring the result, we will always get a smaller number of opponents than is true to reality. This is why many pollsters use additional, indirect questions to measure support for and opposition to war, such as people's attitudes toward peace negotiations; their ideas about the conditions under which peace is possible; their attitude toward the allocation of budget funds for military needs; and so on.

Those to whom we refer as "opponents" are both similar to and different from the "declarative" opponents of the war studied by our quantitative colleagues. We consider those who consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the war during our interactions with them to be opponents of the war. In this sense, they are similar to "declarative opponents." However, unlike the latter, many of our opponents would not be so frank when answering a direct question about their support for the war on the record—they may remain silent about their negative attitude toward the war and therefore not be counted by polling companies. Thus, the group we describe here makes up more than 10-15% of the Russian population, although its exact size is difficult to determine.

What kinds of opponents are there? Segmentation

Opponents of the war come in different shapes and sizes. They consume different media content, they build relationships with other people and social institutions differently, and they have different ways of criticizing the war. Therefore, we divided the opponents of war that we encountered during our fieldwork into several groups: integrated, isolated, suppressed, and activists. Of course, qualitative data cannot be used to judge the size of a particular group, but we can nevertheless make assumptions about their scale—which is precisely what we will do.

Integrated opponents are those who, for various reasons, decide to continue living in Russia and being part of Russian society. They do not support the war, but do not express their point of view openly, and most importantly, do not break ties with their loved ones who are loyal to the state. Feeling that they are unable to influence the situation, they prefer to hear less about the war, reduce their media consumption and try, in their own words, to "live a normal life." In our field, we have encountered many opponents of this type, most of all in small towns across all three regions, where there is not the diversity of opinion and environment that can still be found in the capitals. We believe that this is a fairly common way of existence for opponents outside of cities with a population of over a million. Other researchers have also written about the tendency for opponents of the war to integrate into the loyal state or apolitical majority.

Maria, for example—a 30-year-old resident of Udurgh Village in Buryatia, who works in a supplementary education center—took the news of the invasion very hard. For the first six months, she could not go back to living a normal life. However, as time went by, she followed the news about the war less and less. According to her, "if I watched it every day, I don't think my psyche would hold out—I even had terrible nightmares at the time." As a result, she came to the conclusion that she "does not believe any politicians," neither pro-Russian nor pro-Ukrainian, and also stopped taking too "absolute" a position in disputes with loved ones, not wanting to quarrel with them, because "there is no point":

> "When it all started, I was probably depressed for half a year—there was nothing I wanted, everything seemed pointless, I was scared. What's probably more scary is getting used to it. <...> But at least I love my country. I love my land, I love my small homeland, I love the place around me, because I grew up here, I have many friends and acquaintances here. My family even has different opinions on this matter—before I was more absolute, I argued. And now there is no point in even showing it, because I still love them, and fighting because of this? Starting a civil war within my family? I don't want that."

While remaining an opponent of the war, Maria accepts her loved ones, and even her country, which she is learning to love again. She keeps silent about her negative attitude towards the war, explaining that "we live in a society <...> where you can't speak openly." Working in an educational institution, she regularly encounters collections of donations for Russian mobilized soldiers, which are organized by her colleagues. At first, she refused to participate, but then agreed, hoping that the money would go to "our brothers" and not directly to the war. In other words, she integrates into the rather state-loyal society of Udurgh, without ceasing to be an opponent of the war.

Pyotr, a 41-year-old male transportation worker from Krasnodar, is becoming increasingly despondent as the war drags on, believing that no good will come of it. At the same time, he believes that one must somehow adapt to a reality that one cannot change. Pyotr is cutting down on his consumption of news about the war so as not to "get stressed out," maintains contact with his pro-war relatives, and even participates in fundraising to help acquaintances who have mobilized and sent to the front. However, this does not mean that he justifies the war, continuing to believe that military action against Ukraine is pointless.

Isolated opponents, unlike opponents who integrate into their new reality, surround themselves with people who share their anti-war views. They tend to see people with pro-war views as uneducated or "brainwashed" by propaganda, in other words, to stereotype them. Isolated opponents who have continued to live in Russia for various reasons, dream of leaving—and this also distinguishes them from the opponents of the war described above. However, like those integrating into the new reality, isolated opponents complain of war fatigue, reduce their consumption of political news and try to live a normal life. Since not everyone has the opportunity to isolate themselves from the majority inside a bubble of like-minded people, it can be assumed that the size of this group is smaller than the previous one.

Thus, Pasha, an anti-war Cheryomushkin resident in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, after the war began, cuts off communication with pro-war friends and relatives who, from his point of view, do not understand and do not even try to understand what is happening. Over two years, he forms a circle of anti-war friends. Pasha leaves (and takes his wife and children) to Kazakhstan after the announcement of mobilization in 2022, but returns, since his work is in Russia. However, he still dreams of leaving Russia forever. Nevertheless, even he tries to live as "normal" a life as possible before his potential departure.

It is significant that, despite the dissimilarity between the isolated opponents and the opponents who have integrated into the new reality, both of them are in some sense deliberately depoliticizing themselves, refusing to engage in their usual (before the war and in the early days of the war) consumption of political news. Both groups feel that they cannot influence the situation, and therefore there is no point in reliving it again and again. They feel tired of their own disempowerment and strive to protect themselves from the war as much as possible in order to be able to "live a normal life" in Russian society. Here is how one of the interlocutors, a 46-year-old printing house employee from Krasnodar, explains her decision in an interview:

> "I realized that it is very difficult for me to work because I am thinking about the wrong things, I am constantly on Telegram, I am constantly distracted, I make a lot of mistakes. That is, I have a choice: either **I worry a lot**, I worry so much, **and cannot do anything to change the situation**. Because realistically, **one person won't change anything**, won't affect the situation, well, in any way. And I'd lose my job. **Or I can continue to work and then devote less time and energy to this issue**."

If in the first months of the war many opponents forced themselves not to "get used" to the war, to read political news and not lose the ability to be horrified by it (we wrote about this in our first analytical report), then after a while this attitude changes to the opposite. Two years after the

start of the so-called “special military operation,” in their attempts to distance themselves from difficult, depressing news, many opponents of the war converge with those apolitical Russians who find justifications for the war: both are not happy with what is happening, but do not feel able to influence anything, and therefore prefer to distance themselves.

Suppressed opponents, as the name suggests, fail to overcome this initial depressive state. Unlike integrated and isolated opponents, they continue to consume information about the war from liberal media and, in a sense, never return to “normal life.” They do not isolate themselves from their pro-war loved ones, maintaining contact with them, but they also fail to fully integrate into society at large. They dream of leaving Russia, but do not see any realistic opportunities to realize this dream. These are people who have lost their old place in the world, but have not yet found an alternative. In a sense, this is a temporary, transitional state that is difficult to remain in for long: over time, such opponents may come to terms and integrate into society; they may find like-minded people and become isolated; or they may leave Russia. Therefore, this group appears to be even smaller in number than the previous two.

Finally, **activist opponents** are those who are involved in anti-war activism. They surround themselves with anti-war-minded people, often other activists, and continue to actively consume news about the war. They do not try to return to ”normal life,” but they, unlike all other groups, look at what is happening with optimism, believing that the war and Putin’s regime will not last forever, and with their efforts are bringing everyone closer to a different, happy Russian future. Of course, it is very difficult to estimate the size of this group from our interlocutor pool, but in any, even the most democratic, society, activists are an overwhelming minority and, at the same time, play a very important role. In our field, in which we sought to talk to ”ordinary” people, we met only one activist, but separate studies have been devoted to anti-war activism in Russia—for instance, we recommend this report.

What are opponents dissatisfied with? Criticism of the war

A Levada Center poll conducted in March 2024 showed that the most popular argument in favor of ending the war and moving on to peace negotiations is the fact that people are constantly dying because of the war, both on the Russian and Ukrainian sides (as many as 49% of interlocutors chose this response). In our conversations with opponents of the war, this type of criticism is also the most common: “How can you be happy about war, about military action where houses are collapsing, people are losing property and loved ones?” one of our interlocutors, a 41-year-old transport worker from Krasnodar, said, outraged. Interviews and informal conversations with opponents show that the argument that the war is unacceptable because of the victims it claims is part of a more general type of criticism of war—a moral and ethical criticism. Most opponents argue in one way or another that war not only means the deaths of innocent people, but that it is a barbaric act, something that should not exist in the modern civilized world. As we showed in our previous analytical report, this attitude was typical of a significant number of Russians in the first days and weeks of the war. However, later some of them began to convince themselves, not without the help of pro-government media, that such a view is an infantile, naive view, because in

reality wars are going on everywhere and always. Many of today's opponents of the war are those who have managed to preserve this "naive" attitude and to carry it through all two years of the war:

> "But it seems to me that in any case, **war is bad, when people come into conflict with one another**. Any violence—I am personally against it," says a 30-year-old female teacher at a supplemental education center in Udurgh Village." "I am above
>
> all saying that this must not stand. This **should not be permitted at all in the 21st century**. I thought that this should have been consigned to history. How can one commit such **medieval atrocities** at such a time, when there are so many interesting things in life?" asks a 53-year-old female accountant from Ulan-Ude."

However, anti-war Russians speak about the unjustified victims of war not only to point out how unacceptable all war is in general, but also to emphasize the senselessness of this particular war. As one of the isolated opponents, a 42-year-old male construction worker from Cheryomushkin, complains angrily in an interview, "You won't bring back these children who died, people who **for no reason...To what end? For what?**" It is important to emphasize that our interlocutors often point out not only the cruelty, but also the senselessness of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: this war has no meaningful goals, all the authorities' explanations are unconvincing, which means that no one except the authorities needs the war. Thus, 41-year-old Petr, a transportation worker from Krasnodar, says in an interview:

> " **Idon't understand** why the fighting has been going on for so long today. **I don't understand**. There are practically no significant changes in the news feeds, but battles are being fought. **I don't understand** why this operation has been going on for so long and people are suffering losses. **I don't understand** why."

It is characteristic that in this small fragment he uses the phrase "I don't understand" four times, turning it into the main critical argument against the war. He doesn't stop there and enters into a dispute with one of the most common justifications for the war that Russians regularly hear both from pro-government media and from their loved ones. This justification sounds like this: we are not attacking Ukraine, we are defending ourselves from a threat, because Ukraine, which is being controlled by the West, could attack first. Pyotr considers this argument untenable:

> "We are not stupid people, we understand that Ukraine itself, as it is now, is not capable of even dreaming of attacking a country the size of Russia. It's simply incapable of such a thing, it is stupid to think that a child would attack his adult uncle and defeat him. Naturally, that would never happen. I think that there was no likelihood that Ukraine would have the guts to attack Russia. It would be suicidal."

This type of criticism by opponents is somewhat reminiscent of the criticism voiced by non-opponents—i.e., those who generally justify the war but still criticize it from time to time. We described this phenomenon—switching between criticism and justification of the war by apolitical Russians—in the section above. Apolitical Russians who justify the war regularly ask rhetorical

questions about the meaning of the war. "For what, for whom are our boys dying?" they ask aggressively. Our researcher, who was collecting data in Krasnodar Krai, regularly struck up conversations with taxi drivers, most of whom justified the war in one way or another. One of her taxi drivers, in response to a question about whether he had received a service summons, suddenly said: "And what good would that do me? People are dying..." He paused and added: "I don't want to. And who am I defending? **I don't even understand it. Who should I defend it for?**" This brief conversation with this taxi driver is not enough to confidently call him an opponent or non-opponent of the war. But what is important to note here is that dissatisfaction with the "incomprehensibility" and senselessness of the war is an attitude shared among opponents and apolitical non-opponents of the war. What distinguishes them is the register in which this attitude is voiced: while opponents of war express it persistently, with indignation, sometimes rage, apolitical interlocutors who justify the war speak of the senselessness of war hesitantly, as if still trying to find meaning in it. As a result, in the case of opponents of war, this attitude becomes the key basis for consistent opposition to war, while in the case of its non-opponents, it is combined with their justifications of war. Nevertheless, this attitude itself can play a key role in the development of the anti-war agenda in Russia, since it potentially unites a significant part of Russians with very different views.

Of course, the data we gathered also contain other types of criticism of the war, but much less frequently than the first two. Thus, some opponents explain their dissatisfaction with the war by the fact that it does not solve the country's internal problems or, even worse, creates new problems. In other words, instead of increasing retirement funds or developing education and medicine, the state spends its resources on the war. In addition, the war leads to new economic problems, causes an outflow of specialists abroad and polarizes Russian society.

It is interesting that in the first months of the war, along with the senselessness of the so-called "special military operation," opponents were outraged by the fact that it is unacceptable to attack a "brotherly" nation or, on the contrary, condemned the invasion of a "foreign," independent country (we wrote about this in our first analytical report). Now, however, these arguments are almost never heard from the opponents of the war, as if, over the past year and a half or two, Ukraine has become too different to remain "brotherly," and at the same time too tied to Russian foreign policy to remain "foreign." The war is changing Russian society, and opponents living in Russia, one way or another, look at the world differently than they did in the first months of the invasion of Ukraine. We will explain the importance of this observation in the sections below.

Opponents and their environment. Isolation or a desire to understand

Representative public opinion polls currently being conducted in Russia show that a person's social environment is directly related to their perception of the war. For example, those who consider the military operation to be successful are mostly surrounded by those who share their opinion, and vice versa. Qualitative data also reveals this tendency: often, our interlocutors who are against the war either already find themselves among like-minded people or consistently create such an environment for themselves, cutting ties with those who supported the invasion of Ukraine. As one interlocutor, a 34-year-old research fellow at a university in Krasnodar, explains while speaking

about her colleagues, "here I have my research circle, people who are accessible, they understand everything, we have one [shared] narrative, one point of view." In small towns far from the capitals, people did not often find themselves in a circle of like-minded people when the war began, so they often had to cut back on communication with their former friends. For example, according to a 42-year-old male construction worker from Cheryomushkin,

> "For the most part, **I've removed such [war-supporting] people from my life**. I know that they're stoking the fire, having heated debates, but I try not to take it on, not to put it on my shoulders—**they can do that without me**. I won't take part in it."

It is telling that those who isolate themselves from the pro-war part of society are the ones who are more inclined to label their opponents negatively. As at the beginning of the war (we wrote about this in our first analytical report), they consider their fellow citizens who justify the war to be uneducated, and therefore susceptible to the influence of propaganda. "This is simply a brainwashed person, one might say, in terms of propaganda," says one interlocutor, a 27-year-old Master's student from Ulan-Ude, speaking about her friend. Her fellow countrywoman, a 53-year-old accountant, explains her attitude to opponents in a little more detail:

> "Why don't I argue with them? From their conversations I understand that **most people have a superficial understanding of the actual nuts and bolts**, or rather they have no deep or technical knowledge whatsoever. **People have a very shallow understanding of history**, they only see the situation on a surface level. The quality of education over the years has been…It's just fallen to zero. **People think in the same cookie-cutter templates**."

It is interesting, however, that other opponents of the war, sensing that the war will be a part of Russian reality for a long time and understanding that they are powerless to change this situation, accept the new reality one way or another. This is the reality in which they will have to exist for some time, sharing its hardships with loved ones who hold different views. Without ceasing to be opponents of the war and the regime, these people try to be understanding of those who are not like-minded, but who also suffer from the war in one way or another. For example, 29-year-old Batod, a male teacher and opponent of the war from Ulan-Ude, says that convincing those who have lost loved ones in the "special military operation" that the war is criminal is inhumane:

> "Because, let's say someone lost their loved ones. Well, you're not going to tell the person, convince them of the opposite, that everything was in vain and all that. **They already feel so bad, and you're going to say more bad things. That would be very strange**."

Then he continues:

> "But then some people started to come to the realization that they needed to keep on living. And how should I react to these people? **I have to build with these people, continue [moving forward]**. And with these people...And then suddenly

> something...**These are unpredictable times. If something happens to me, I'll come to you [for help]. And they will come to me**, and so on, and so forth. And more... As pompous as it may sound, yes, humanity... No matter how paradoxical it may be, this is how I see it, but there is more humanity in this viewpoint." "First of
>
> all, if you take the first days and weeks of the special operation, every family, every group of people—colleagues, others, friends, all that—they were divided into two camps [supporters and opponents of the war]. <…> That's essentially how it was across the whole country. And we were no exception. But then **some people started to come to the realization that they needed to keep on living**. And how should I react to these people? <…> These are unpredictable times. **If something happens to me, I'll come to you [for help]. And they will come to me, and so on, and so forth**. <…> [Here] family and community ties are strong. That's why if you say something, for example, your relatives will start up: 'And what about you? How are you doing?' <…> You can voice your opinion on social networks, but what about them? Social media is also just a big village, as it turns out. **You post something, an opinion of some sort—that's it, your relatives instantly know about it**. They start on you: 'Ugh, how could you?' <…> **Here, there is still the concern about 'what will my relatives think of me?'**

The desire of some war opponents to understand their fellow countrymen, despite their divergent views on the war—to maintain a warm, compassionate relationship with them—is growing over time. As in the first few months of the war, these people avoid conflict with loved ones, and at the same time search for new grounds for forming "positive" attachments (that is, not only through avoiding the bad, but also seeking out the good) with loved ones through shared "human values," as well as to the country through love for their hometown or region, and so on:

"But at least **I love my country**. I love my land, **I love my small homeland**, I love the place around me, because **I grew up here, I have many friends and acquaintances here**. My family even has different opinions on this matter—before I was more absolute, I argued. And now there is no point in even showing it, **because I still love them, and fighting because of this?** Starting a civil war within my family? I don't want that." (f., 30 years old, education worker, Udurgh)."

In the end, many opponents of the war feel that they are in the same boat as Russians who justify the war and that, one way or another, these are the people (and not those who emigrated) with whom they will have to share in the negative consequences.

The war as part of a new order

Thus, war becomes an ineradicable part of the new order in Russia, one which even those who find war unacceptable are forced to reckon with in one way or another. While in Moscow and St. Petersburg (and perhaps in several other cities with a population of over a million) many opponents of war manage to exist in anti-war environments, in small towns it is more difficult to find people with anti-war views to surround yourself with, and therefore many opponents somehow integrate into the new reality, into a larger society that is loyal to the state or apolitically indifferent (while

continuing to condemn the war). As we already know, they reduce their consumption of political news and try to live a "normal life," because "it is impossible to think about it 24/7, because you have your own affairs, life, children, family and work" (m., 42 years old, builder, Cheryomushkin). "Well, this is the reality we live in now, we are trying to adapt to it, we are trying to live with it," Pyotr, a transport worker from Krasnodar, sums up the situation.

Some opponents of the war also criticize the simplistic, black-and-white view of the situation in Russia, according to which everyone who ended up in the war zone or helped those mobilized automatically becomes an accomplice to Putin's criminal war. Interestingly, these opponents are thus challenging not only the view of Russia often held by anti-war émigrés, but also their own view at the start of the war.

Of particular interest in this regard is the story of one of our interlocutors from Ulan-Ude, education worker Georgy, who refused to speak on the record. As an opponent of the war, Georgy complains about the "bipolarity" of the anti-war viewpoint in Russia, according to which "there are enemies and there are friends." In real life, according to him, he had encountered those who had signed a contract before the war and were unable to break it at the beginning of the "special operation," or those who were drafted into the army against their will, lacking the resources and knowledge to evade, much less resist. Once, he says, he himself was asked to give a ceremonial speech in honor of the anniversary of a military event. He wanted to refuse, but his superiors threatened him. As a result, he gave the mandatory speech during a city event, but tried to speak neutrally, avoiding value judgments in support of the war. The most interesting thing in the conversation with Georgy, an opponent of the war, is his willingness to end up in the army as a sign of solidarity with other victims of this unjust war. Below is an ethnographic diary excerpt describing this part of the conversation:

> "'Sometimes there is simply no choice but to go to the front,' says Georgy. He tells the story of his colleague, who they 'came for' despite his severe diabetes, and was sent to the front. His close friends and family, including Georgy, tried to 'save' him, but nothing could be done. And then the colleague died, 'and that's it, he's gone.' It was possible to flee Russia in September 2022, after the announcement of mobilization, or in March 2022, after the start of the war, but now it's too late, Georgy concludes. Because, they say, if you do it now, then how can you 'look people in the eye,' how can you continue to live in this republic? The experience that people—even those who are anti-war—have in Russia and the experience they have in emigration are completely different experiences, according to Georgy."

We see that Georgy, being an opponent of war, feels the need to share its consequences with his less fortunate or less protected fellow citizens—with those who find themselves in the combat zone. While many apolitical non-opponents of war are ready to join the army because they feel unable to defy fate ("what can I do," "there is no way out," "if they call me up, I'll go"), opponents like Georgy view this option as a conscious moral and ethical choice. We may not agree with the logic or values behind such a choice, but we must understand that it comes from an anti-war, not a pro-war mindset—it's just that this mindset is formed in a society in which the war is understood as an inevitable part of the new order.

This is why other opponents of the war may, for example, demand benefits from the state if someone close to them died at the front, or provide material and non-material assistance to military servicemen they know. The latter often occurs as a result of social pressure—as one of our interlocutors admitted during an informal conversation over dinner in Cheryomushkin, "if you don't want to participate, you're not considered a very good person." But at the same time, many opponents of the war do not see anything shameful in such acts, if they're not directly sponsoring the war. According to the 34-year-old male director of a private company from Krasnodar:

> "The only thing I did, and it was just once—I sent a box of painkillers. But I was guaranteed 355 times over that this painkiller would be for people who had their arms or legs torn off, that is, who 100

So, not all those who help the mobilized soldiers support the war, and some even openly oppose it. But they live in a society in which their loved ones, often against their will, find themselves in a combat zone without experience, without uniforms, without medicine—and cannot always remain on the sidelines.

Some opponents of the war who choose to adapt to this new reality only do so because they feel powerless to change it, but also because they are thinking strategically about their future in post-war Russia, in which people like them may have to engage in politics. This means they need to maintain a clean reputation and not fight against their own country, no matter how they feel about what is happening. The same private company director from Krasnodar explains in an interview:

> "I believe that **if they don't plan to practice politics and don't associate themselves with Russia**, then they have the right [to fight on Ukraine's side]. But if they plan to return to the country, this is also a crime. I believe this is not right. For example, you could launch a drone that will hit somewhere in the Belgorod Oblast, at some granny who is not participating in the war. Therefore, Russian citizens should not fight with Russia. This does not relieve Russia of responsibility, but nevertheless. Ukraine's right to defend itself is inviolable, they must do this, but without the participation [of Russians]."

In the end, many opponents of the war living in Russia insist that if we are worried about the future of our country, it is better to accept the war as part of this reality, so that we can at least change something for the better, than to reject everything that is happening in Russia and say goodbye to it forever. An excerpt from an interview with a 46-year-old adviser to the director of a private company from Krasnodar illustrates this idea:

> "In terms of leaving, I still believe that **some people should remain behind who are able and willing to do something to improve life** here. If you can somehow help your city, as pretentious as it may sound, and your country, then it's better to do it here, because **no matter how regrettable and cynical it may sound, life goes on**. And a large number of people still need help. I mean somehow making their lives better, whoever you can reach. **If you leave**, with the exception of journalism or polemics, **you will hardly have any influence on what is happening**."

One way or another, about two years after the start of the war, it has become a norm of Russian society. However, this norm is in no way a moral or ethical norm! In other words, Russians do not begin to consider war to be right, necessary, or a positive event, and opponents of war do not begin to justify it, even partially. The transformation of war into a norm only means that it is now an integral part of the new order, something unpleasant, but at the same time routine and unavoidable, something that even anti-war Russians are forced to get used to and adapt to. It is important to remember this when we succumb to the temptation to imagine Russian society in black and white.

***

Thus, the interlocutors we call "opponents" are those who consistently criticize the war during our conversations with them, without ever switching over to justifying it. Various polls define "declarative opponents" similarly, but unlike these polls, our data allow us to capture those opponents who are not ready to express their opposition publicly to unfamiliar researchers and interviewers, but are ready to share it within the framework of informal conversations with researchers. Among opponents of war, there are those who are trying to integrate into the new reality ("integrated opponents"); those who, on the contrary, isolate themselves from it, surrounding themselves with people with anti-war views ("isolated opponents"); those who are unable to do either ("suppressed opponents"); and, finally, those who continue to fight against the war ("activist opponents"). Opponents of the war primarily criticize it from moral and ethical positions—as a barbaric act, as something that should not exist in the civilized world; but also for its senselessness, since the state cannot provide clear, convincing explanations for its goals.

Some opponents of the war, such as "isolated" and "activist" opponents surround themselves only with like-minded people, but this is not easy to do in small towns far from the capitals. Therefore, in such places we often observe the opposite tendency: opponents of the war somehow integrate into institutions and communities loyal to the state and feel sympathy for those with whom they have to share its hardships, even if the latter justify this war. These opponents do not change their attitude towards the war, but they change their attitude towards Russian society, many apolitical members of which did not choose the war, but are forced to live with its consequences. The opponents themselves also get tired of the constant feeling of helplessness associated with terrible news about the war, and therefore reduce their consumption of this news in an attempt to live a "normal life." However, many of them think about the fate of their country, which they love, and they only have the opportunity to exert any sort of influence if they accept the new military reality to some extent. After all, if you completely reject it and leave Russia, as one of our interlocutors who opposes the war puts it, "you will hardly have any influence on what is happening."

4.1.3 Non-opponents and opponents: Comparison

A variety of evidence and data indicate that, firstly, there are many more people with unclear, contradictory attitudes toward the war than confident supporters and opponents, and, secondly, their number is only increasing over time. But how can we study this "gray zone" in the perception of war? This can be done using qualitative methods, and in particular, the ethnographic approach,

in which researchers observe people's conversations and behavior in a "natural environment." Interestingly, the results this method produces are in themselves related to the peculiarities of how different people perceive war. For example, we found that during informal conversations, people with a clear stance (that is, confident opponents and supporters of the war) talk about war in much the same way as they do during formal interviews. However, apolitical Russians who justify war "on the record" behave completely differently during informal conversations. In addition, during informal conversations, supporters and opponents of the war willingly discuss the special operation, while non-opponents consistently try to steer away from this topic and talk about something else. In other words, those who have a position on the war (usually these are people with a developed interest in politics) consistently voice it in a variety of communication formats. Those who do not have a clear position—apolitical Russians who simultaneously justify and complain about the war—often change their assessments of what is happening depending on the situation, that is, what they are talking about with whom, and under what circumstances. Therefore, the presence of ethnographic material gives us special advantages in our attempts to understand what is going on inside this "gray zone."

Intuitively, one might assume that the key differences in perceptions of the war between Russians who justify it and those who oppose it must lie in the fact that the first group always defends the war, while the second always criticizes it. However, this is not the case at all. One one hand, almost two years after the outbreak of war, some opponents have begun to integrate into the new Russian reality. They have not stopped condemning the war, but at the same time they began to understand the behavior and reasoning of some Russians who justify it. On the other hand, those who are not against the war are dissatisfied with what is happening in the country and with the war itself, and in certain situations they voice this dissatisfaction. But unlike confident opponents of the war, they switch between criticizing the war and justifying it, depending on the context. Nevertheless, there are similarities and differences in what exactly opponents and non-opponents of the war are dissatisfied with, and in how they express their dissatisfaction.

As at the beginning of the war, opponents today criticize the Russian invasion from a moral and ethical standpoint. They call the war a crime and barbarity, something that is unacceptable in the 21st century. Such criticism is fundamentally foreign to those who are not against the war. Moreover, if they hear such statements from others, they begin to justify Russia's actions even more strongly. The fact is that, as they were socialized in a depoliticized society and not interested in politics, they often do not distinguish between the "state," the "country" and its citizens, themselves. But, of course, they share a universal human sense of morality—the idea that wars and the killing of innocent citizens are bad. Therefore, when they are told that Russia is waging a criminal war and killing people, they may take these accusations personally: it is they, the Russians, who are committing these crimes. Feeling that the accusations against them are unfair, since they did not choose the war and are unable to stop it, they begin to deny the very nature of the crime: Russia did not start the war first, we were defending ourselves from the NATO threat, and in general, there are wars being waged everywhere.

However, non-opponents also criticize the "special operation" from a moral standpoint, but take an entirely different approach—they complain about violations of the generally accepted moral norms of the community that have been caused by the war. For example, they may express

dissatisfaction with the fact that the wife of a mobilized man killed at the front bought an overly expensive car with the money he received, or that a young husband and father voluntarily went to the front to earn money, leaving his newborn child at home. This criticism of the actions of their acquaintances ultimately turns into criticism of the war: life is more important than money, our interlocutors say—why go to war for no apparent reason? In other words, opponents of the war condemn it from the point of view of universal ethical norms, as barbarity and a crime, while Russians who justify the war derive criticism from everyday, and even mundane, moral judgements (or condemnations—an acquaintance abandoned his child). But in both cases, the source of criticism is the habit of evaluating the surrounding world in ethical or moral categories, which is characteristic of a depoliticized society.

In general, apolitical non-opponents of war are much more likely than confident supporters or opponents to judge it based on their own specific, personal experience. For example, it has long been obvious to opponents of war that "they lie on TV"—they excluded television from their media repertoire many years ago. For more apolitical non-opponents, this fact became especially noticeable during the war, because the personal testimonies of their acquaintances—residents of eastern Ukraine or those who have been mobilized to the front—contradicted the official media's description of events. In light of these personal testimonies, the propaganda narrative began to seem especially false and hypocritical to them. "What they say on TV is all bullshit,' they argue, because in reality people are being thrown into the line of fire with no preparation and the enormous losses aren't being reported. This makes non-opponents question the very meaning of the war—why are "our boys" dying? However, this questioning but clearly critical statement about the war does not lead opponents to the next step—asserting that the entire "special operation" is a mistake.

In this way, the feeling that the war is also common among confident opponents and many apolitical Russians who generally justify the war. However, for opponents of the war, its senselessness serves as one of the grounds for criticizing the "special operation" on the whole: if the state does not have a clear explanation of why the war is necessary, then it is not necessary at all. Non-opponents, however, reason a little differently: on the one hand, the hypocrisy of the propaganda narrative about the war makes them have doubt in this rationale for ordinary citizens or for the country (if you are lying to us, then why are we fighting your war?), on the other hand, they immediately try to find meaning in the situation, even if this meaning is hidden from them (after all, the authorities know what they are doing).

Russians with very different views on the war still find a way to formulate criticism of it from an economic and social point of view. However, once again, apolitical Russians who justify the war more often start from personal encounters with specific problems: retirement costs are increasing, prices are rising, utility rates are rising, and the authorities are sending "our boys" to the front without training and uniforms and asking us, ordinary citizens, to provide them with all this. These "boys" come back without arms and legs, but there is no decent medical care in the city. Opponents of the war, on the other hand, voice similar criticism on a more abstract level: social and infrastructural problems are not being solved, and the state is spending money on the war. In other words, generalizing much of what has been said above, opponents of the war (as well as confident supporters) tend to consider the situation from the viewpoint of their moral or political principles, while apolitical Russians who justify the war only occasionally move to this

level, starting from a very specific, personal experience in which they encountered the reality of wartime.

There is a reason we said "occasionally": indeed, in some cases, the reasoning of non-opponents of the war does have the potential to reach a more general, political level. For example, when justifying the war, they often defend "Russia," a certain, although vague, but generalized "us," which is accused "from the outside" of military aggression. Abstract Russian identity (referring to Russian citizens, and not all cultural/ethnic Russians; "rossiiskiy" as opposed to "russkiy") thus begins to play a major role for some of them. Similarly, complaints about very specific everyday problems that they or their loved ones face because of the war can lead to—albeit still rhetorical—questioning the meaning of the war.

4.2 Chapter 6. Who will solve our problems? Attitudes toward the state in wartime

The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise and a shock to most Russians. At the same time, almost from the first days of the war, the state began to demand loyalty from its citizens for this decision, which was not the most transparent for the people. With no experience forming judgments regarding complex (geo)political issues, many Russians were forced to rely on propaganda arguments or the views of more enlightened relatives in order to somehow determine their attitudes toward the war. However, even if an event of such a scale—a war with another country—was occurring for the first time in their lives, they had already been forced to deal with the sometimes incomprehensible decisions of the state both at the federal (for example, reforms) and local (regional issues and the behavior of local authorities) levels. Over time, it became clear to us researchers that the logic that many Russians applied in their judgments about the war was not something they had invented from scratch: it was partly the same logic with which they had previously reasoned about the state, both the "big" government in the form of the Kremlin and the "small" one in their cities, towns, and villages. This chapter is devoted to the topic of people's attitudes toward the state and toward authorities at different levels, not least in connection with the social problems that people face in their communities. Here, we will show how opponents of the war and non-opponents relate to politics and the state differently. This will help us better understand the source of the differences in their assessments of the war.

4.2.1 Non-opponents

"Vote or don't, you'll get the same thing…": A general view of the state and politics

So, the majority of non-opponents in Russia are ***those who justify the war and at the same time criticize it, obviously without being confident supporters***. These people, as a rule, do not follow political news (except perhaps during the first months of the war), are not interested in what is happening "at the top," in the Kremlin, and feel a weak connection between the problems of their everyday life and the decisions made by officials somewhere over in Moscow.

For example, Kristina, a 25-year-old student from Ulan-Ude, is not the most "passive" person: she and her fellow students periodically help animal shelters and World War II veterans. However, she has never followed and does not follow the news about the country and the world, and she participated in elections only once, because "it was necessary for students to vote." Galina, an employee of the museum in the city of Cheryomushkin in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, also admits that she is not at all interested in state politics, and that in general, politics is more of a man's domain than a woman's. Galina periodically looks at Yandex news and hears news from the TV when other family members are watching. At the same time, she follows local VKontakte groups and even reads local newspapers, because she cares about what is happening within her city, unlike "politics":

> "Politics is at the government level. It's the relationship between countries. Politics that is conducted within the country. What else is politics? It is some decisions made

> at a completely higher state scale. And it's other countries…Politics is **something state-related, something big that I don't understand**, that's for sure."

While talking to apolitical Russians who justify the war in all three regions, we periodically asked them questions about the (then) upcoming presidential elections in the spring of 2024. Many of our interlocutors had difficulty remembering which elections we were talking about, who was being elected, and even asked whether we meant the Russian or American elections (about which some of them were better informed than the Russian ones). This obvious lack of information in itself clearly demonstrates our interlocutors' attitude to the Russian state—an entity that exists somewhere out there, far away, and has no relation to their everyday lives. Sometimes interlocutors even presented such apoliticality as a conscious attitude, as a kind of value: "I **try** to be apolitical, not to take either side, to live as circumstances develop," a retiree from Krasnodar who was educated in history and political science tells us. And what's more, she wants her children to be apolitical: "I'd probably like them to live like me, with some kind of blinders, apolitically, so that it doesn't affect them."

Russians who justify the war are generally loyal to the state. However, many of them do not so much believe that the state and the president are doing something good for the people, as they are afraid of changes for the worse. As one of the Krasnodar taxi drivers put it in a conversation with our researcher, "Volodya [Putin] is just keeping his seat warm, not doing anything." And then he added: "But if you remove Volodya and put someone else in, it's unclear what will happen." This attitude, as you might have guessed, can be transformed into one of the justifications for war that we have all encountered: war is, of course, bad, but if Russia had not sent troops into Ukraine, something worse could have happened. This fear of change occurring for the worse is even more obvious in an interview with Denis, a 17-year-old resident of Cheryomushkin and a college student. When asked whether Putin will ever be replaced as president, he answers:

> "Of course he'll be replaced. How old is he now? Just no one knows who. There's already a candidate, but if he takes over, **he will be even worse than Putin, he wants to start a war right away**."

This answer may seem counterintuitive. Hasn't Putin already started a war? But this answer illustrates well the fears of many Russians who justify the war: now, under Putin, we can still live a normal life, and who knows what will happen when the government changes—God forbid a "real" war comes to our homes! Other interlocutors even admitted to us that they plan to vote for Putin because only he, Putin, can end the war—he started it, so he must end it, they say. In other words, for many apolitical Russians who justify the war, loyalty to the government, the president, and, in fact, the war means not so much approval of what is happening as fear of changes for the worse.

Most of them note a variety of problems existing within the country, and they are, of course, dissatisfied with them. This dissatisfaction, however, does not make them consistent critics of the state and does not lead them to consider the need for systemic changes. Quite the opposite: they tend to justify the existing order of things. For example, Polina, a 33-year-old chairwoman of the precinct election commission from Cheryomushkin, understands perfectly well that there was a reason that the "oppose all candidates" column had disappeared from the ballots—after all, this

was one of the few ways to legally express disagreement with what was happening in the country. But in commenting on this situation, she tries to present it as natural and normal:

> "**This is reality. We are put in these boxes, we're always being put in a box**. All our lives we are put into some kind of box. You go to work, they tell you: 'We have a dress code,' for example. 'We have time frames: from such and such to such and such, we have such rules, you need to go ask for time off.' Are you going to try to break out of them on purpose, just because you don't like them? Because there will be consequences, right? **It's the same thing—we're just being put into another box. You just need to learn to work from within it**."

In this statement we see the same logic that many apolitical Russians use to justify war: of course, no decent person wants war, but wars are, alas, part of our reality, they happen always and everywhere, we need to come to terms with this reality and learn to live in it. This attitude towards acceptance and humility is clearly visible in an interview with a young resident of Cheryomushkin, 21-year-old Maxim. The researcher asks him a somewhat provocative question: "Do you know," she says, "that there are people who believe that this war should not have been started, that it is unjustified? Did you know that this point of view exists?" In response, Maxim unexpectedly begins to state his reasoning—not about war at all, but about the state. The authorities always do what they want, he says, without asking the opinion of citizens. Perhaps we are dealing with a hidden critic of the state and war? Not at all: Maxim needs this seemingly critical reasoning in order to explain why people should not interfere in the affairs of the state:

> "It seems to me that it is **not for us to decide** [whether the war should have been started]. It's higher up, these are all Putin problems. They do everything. They do not ask us. We do not want any reforms, I just remembered some of these reforms, we are against them. And they say: 'We must do it.' And that's it, they do it. And they don't ask us."

Elena, a 50-year-old artist at the Cheryomushkin Community Theater, would seem to be much more critical of the state than Maxim. "There is simply a change in the state paradigm now," she says in an interview. "What does the state need now? It needs people to stay in their places and work, not to try to wriggle their way out. Whoever wriggles their way out will be extinguished, am I right, or not?" Then she complains about the law on extremism, which, according to her, is applied selectively to silence the undesirable. Elena even fears that this law could be used against their amateur performances—who is she if not a convinced critic of the state? After listening sympathetically, the researcher asks: "So what do you think—why are things like this?" And hears an unexpected answer:

> "I think that **we need to look for the positive in everything**, the way out, the bright future. In our plays we also try to make it clear to people where the light is, where to go, where to start. **We need to start with ourselves**, this is my deep conviction, based on my readings of the Fathers of the Church, the Gospel, and my knowledge of history. If each person starts with themselves…"

In other words, even while complaining about the government's actions, Elena doesn't declare it responsible for what is happening, for when answering the question "Why are things like this?", she does not say a word about the government or authorities, instead laying blame on ordinary citizens who, if they want change, must "start with themselves." Even more unexpected is the logic of a 29-year-old entrepreneur from Novonekrasovsk in Krasnodar Krai. His reasoning opens with a criticism of the unfairness of Russian elections—and the interlocutor looks like a die-hard oppositionist. However, it ends by shifting the blame for what is happening to ordinary citizens: as soon as people become more educated and learn how to conduct elections correctly, they will become more honest, he claims.

> "This is the scourge [of our society], we don't have fair elections. And that's why many people say, like, 'everything was decided for us.' No! When the public bands together, there will be independent figures who will know how to conduct elections from beginning to end, because half of the commission members or the main commission members—they don't know the election rules. They do as they were told from above, and not as required by Russian law. I have encountered this more than once. And **if people know about this when they go to be observers, to be members of the commission, they will see how this can be done independently, and then the elections will be held fairly**."

In general, various iterations of the sentiment "if we want change, we need to start with ourselves" are regularly encountered throughout our materials. In many ways, it is evidence of the powerlessness felt by many Russians: not feeling that they can influence anything outside their private lives, they distance themselves from politics and become used to relying only on themselves and their loved ones. This indifference to the activities of the state due to their own powerlessness is clearly visible in the way many interlocutors talk about elections. Here is another fragment from an interview with 21-year-old Maxim from Cheryomushkin:

> Q: What's your attitude on the government, on Putin?
> A: I don't know. **I don't care about them, they don't care about me**.
> Q: Did you vote at any of the elections?
> A: No. I know that **my vote won't actually matter**. They only give the opportunity to vote to those who are voting for the right person. It seems entirely untrue to me that they give people a choice in who will rule.

We regularly encounter this kind of reasoning not just in the interviews we captured on record, but also during the informal conversations in which our researcher took part. For example, in Cheryomushkin our researcher ended up at a meetup with a few local women that had been organized by her key interlocutor Tonya (in the first part of this report we refer to them as "girl's get-togethers"). At some point the conversation turned to the upcoming (at the time) presidential elections. "Alright, so who are we going to vote for?" asked Tonya, knowing that our researcher was interested in this topic. "I'm never voting for anyone ever," replied Alyona. "I'm also not voting," Sveta agreed. "No one's going to vote? But why?" asked Tonya. "I don't see the point,"

replied Alyona. "I don't know any of them," added Masha. "We have so many people in Russia! The elections can go on without us. So what if I don't vote," Alena explained, adding a little later, "they **decide everything ahead of time! Vote or don't, I think you'll get the same thing**." A 23-year-old resident of Krasnodar formulates the same idea as follows: "I am just a **grain of sand under the baseboard**, my vote **will not affect anything**, so there is no point in me doing this." This thought is echoed by a 69-year-old retiree who lives on a farm near Krasnodar and comes to the city to see his grandson:

> "What's the point of going to the elections? What's the point? Vote on the budget once—and that's it. And you'll get the same result. <…> I'm not interested in politics. **They have their business, the people have their own**."

The end of this short comment is fundamentally important. It conveys a feeling that is familiar to many apolitical and war-justifying Russians: the state and ordinary citizens live in two different worlds with different interests, and it is better for the inhabitants of the "second world," the people, not to interfere with the "first world," the state, if they do not want unnecessary problems.

Unlike apolitical Russians who justify the war, among ***confident supporters*** we most often encounter people who follow the news agenda and have some political convictions or at least sympathies. The views of some confident supporters of the war were formed before it began; the views of others—mainly regular viewers of federal news channels—were formed after war broke out. However, both continue to actively follow and take an interest in political news.

Some confident supporters of the war, especially those who have recently become politicized and regularly watch the news on TV, demonstrate their active support for various aspects of the state's activities. For example, they, unlike apolitical Russians who justify the war, are ready to go to the polls—which is clearly evident in an interview with Tamara, a 30-year-old teacher from Novonekrasovsk:

> Q: Have you ever voted before, or now?
> A: On the elections? **Of course, when required, we always go**.
> Q: Federal elections, local—do you participate in all of them?
> A: Yes, all of them.
> Q: And in the local elections, what's important to you when choosing a candidate?
> A: You know, I really... I respect regional achievements, those that are closer to me, that's what I'll choose, yes. Currently, **the heads of both the city and region are simply wonderful**. I just don't know. Really great. They're over there behind the school. Have you been there?

Tamara seems to let it slip that she is participating in the elections because it is "required." This reservation is not surprising: she only began to take an active interest in politics in 2022 and still retains many of the attitudes characteristic of her more apolitical fellow citizens—for example, the idea that elections are necessary for the state, not the people.

It is important to understand, however, that among confident war supporters, there are not only those who demonstrate their support for the state—there are also active critics. For example, 39-year-old Leonid, a local politician in Krasnodar, calls himself a "confident" supporter of the war,

explaining that he has been following the events in Ukraine for a long time and knows firsthand about the fascistization of the country, about which something had to be done. At the same time, he admits, he has a growing list of questions for the Russian government, both in connection with the method of conducting military operations and in connection with domestic policy. And he, like the apolitical businessman from Novonekrasovsk, whose conversation we quoted above, talks about the problem of unfair elections in the country:

> "I will say this—well, if people want Putin, then okay. But the main thing is that it is fair and honest. Because, based on my experience of participating in the last elections, I can say that modern elections with electronic voting, with multi-day voting, when the contents of all the packages are changed, they have turned into a farce. And the results in no way correspond to what citizens really think. I believe that **the authorities are digging a hole for themselves**. Yes, of course, it is convenient to fake elections and get the results that have already been predetermined. But as a result, people's support decreases, the authorities are no longer considered to be for the people, elected officials, and people stop going to the voting booths."

While the apolitical war-justifying Novonekrasovite blames unfair elections on ordinary citizens who have not learned how to properly organize the electoral process and vote, Leonid, a confident supporter of the war, blames the state, which is "digging a hole for itself." People like Leonid can actively demonstrate their loyalty to the state through actions—for example, participation in elections, pro-war volunteering, organizing patriotic events—or, on the contrary, behave as critics. In both these cases, they feel that the state is controlled by the people—something that most Russians have stopped believing in.

Local problems, the government and the war

And so, we have found that many Russians who justify the war are not so much happy with what their state is doing—rather, they simply do not feel capable of influencing the behavior of the distant and incomprehensible Kremlin and are used to solving their own problems: "They [the state] have their business, the people have theirs." But in a sense, they constantly run up against the government in their everyday lives—perhaps not the "big" government in the form of the Kremlin, but the "small" one, in their cities, towns, or regional capitals. In the absence of interest in big politics, many of them say that they follow local problems, know local mayors and governors. Does this mean that, not being interested in and simultaneously justifying the decisions of the "big" government, they are more critical of the activities of the "small" government? Not quite.

On the one hand, they avoid talking about big politics and the state, but they readily discuss local problems. They complain about poor education in schools, the lack of decent higher education institutions around, the lack of medical personnel, problems with infrastructure—roads, water supply, and so on. On the other hand, while, for example, opponents of the war easily connect these local problems with the activities of the state as a whole, then apolitical non-opponents often do not attribute responsibility for them to anyone at all.

One conversation that was particularly indicative of this took place between our researcher and a teacher in Novonekrasovk, Krasnodar Krai. During the interview, the interlocutor avoided

talking about social problems. However, as soon as the interview was over, the recorder was turned off and the informal conversation between the researcher and her interlocutor continued, with the latter complaining about the many problems she faces at work and in life. "It seems," she said, "that **they want** to destroy the education system." Or: "Every good deed in Russia **happens**, as always, in a lousy way." The impersonal grammatical constructions that this teacher uses ("they want," "it happens") allow her to talk about problems but avoid blaming the authorities, both federal and local. With this kind of reasoning, local problems become something similar to a bout of bad weather, which you always want to complain about, but for which it is silly to blame anyone. Let us remember that this is exactly how some apolitical non-opponents justify war—as bad weather or a natural disaster that one would very much like to avoid, but if it happens, one can only come to terms with it.

Many apolitical non-opponents, however, do not limit themselves to simply stating that problems exist—they simultaneously try to normalize the situation, that is, to explain to themselves and others why "everything is not so bad" and why it is possible to continue to coexist, to live a normal life, with these problems at hand. For example, they associate the emergence of problems with objective circumstances that are independent of human will (and then these arguments again resemble complaints about the bad weather outside your window) or claim that local authorities are gradually trying to solve the problems and that they just need to wait a little. Our interlocutors in Krasnodar, regardless of their attitude to the war, regularly spoke about unimaginable traffic jams in the city—sometimes it takes several hours to get from one point to another. But while confident opponents and supporters (!) of the war were inclined to blame the authorities, both local and federal, for their inaction, apolitical Krasnodar residents justifying the war often associated this problem with the peculiarities of the historical development of the city, about which nothing can be done, no matter what power you have. Take, for example, this exemplary fragment from an interview with a 26-year-old male doctor from Krasnodar:

> "Traffic jams and roads are a very difficult issue. I've thought about it quite often. **The problem is that in the center** (especially in the center) **the streets are quite narrow**. That is, there are two lanes at most. And **this creates traffic jams simply because the city is designed for a smaller population**. The city has grown a lot lately. I don't even know...There were some projects to resolve this issue, like a ground-level metro. But they somehow...They talked about it for several years, and then everyone forgot about it. So **to think of a way to remake the infrastructure, probably, in general—it's difficult**."

A 38-year-old resident of Udurgh Village and employee of the supplementary education center, Yulia Badmaevna, reacts in a similar way to the researcher's observation about unexpectedly high prices for food in this small village. She almost immediately agrees with this observation, but hastens to explain the rise in prices by objective circumstances that do not depend on people: how remote the village is from the regional capital:

> Q: I noticed that your prices in the shops are quite high. Are people able to survive on their salaries?

> A: I can't say. They're obviously already used to the rising prices. **Yes, I agree**, we were saying recently, about two years ago I could buy a pack of milk and two loaves of bread for 100 rubles. And **now you can't even buy milk for 100 rubles**. To buy milk and two loaves of bread, you need 200 rubles. What can you do? Of course prices are rising, yes. Gasoline is getting more expensive. Although lately it seems to be holding steady. <…> But in Udurgh, I think that most likely it is **the distance from the capital that has the most impact. Try bringing something all the way from the capital—not everyone wants to do this**."

In other words, Yulia Badmaevna normalizes the generally unpleasant rapid rise in food prices, as if to say, 'How could it be any other way in a place that's so far from the capital? Of course they're high!' In the city of Cheryomushkin in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, our researcher talked to several members of a community theater company who complained about insufficient funding for their theater and the lack of programs to make the city more attractive to tourists. At some point, the researcher asked Alexey, one of the theater actors, "Why do you think this is happening in so many different cities in Russia?" "Why, why, why is a traffic light green?" he replied with a quote from a popular Russian song, meaning that the very question about the reasons for what was happening was rhetorical and could not be answered. However, a little later, Alexey simply began to make justifications for the municipal administration:

> "**What must it be like for the head of the [municipal] administration, for example, to carry the weight on his shoulders** of this entire subsidized city with a huge budget deficit, where everything is a black hole? You fix a bridge in one place, another bridge crumbles. And we come to the conclusion that **they're also solving problems as best they can, and they probably have more problems than me**, that's for sure."

Often, interlocutors switch to justifying the government immediately after statements that may seem too critical to their fellow conversationalists, so as not to appear as overly harsh critics of the government. A 60-year-old female cultural worker from Ulan-Ude, like the community theater troupe members in Cheryomushkin, complains about the underfunding of their (state-funded) organization:

> "I would like to have a good choreography class. I would like to have showers for this class, I would like to have decent bathrooms. I would like to see more money allocated for costumes, because we still sew costumes during our paid hours—that is, we only earn enough to survive" (f., 60 years old, cultural worker, Ulan-Ude)."

But then he seems to come to his senses and hurries to add:

> "**I will mention once again that over the last three years we have turned our face towards culture**. Previously, cultural workers had the lowest salaries. Now I think it's pretty decent. But for some reason, young people aren't coming."

Overall, the justification that there are many issues, but that over the years the situation is getting better, thanks to the efforts of local authorities, is quite common in our interviews. Here is a typical monologue of a young entrepreneur from the city of Novonekrasovsk in Krasnodar Krai:

> "Yes, **there are screw-ups**, yes, nothing about it is perfect, it is clear that you can find fault with everything. And whoever wants to find fault will, whoever has a bad life will always have a bad life. But if you compare overall, the difference is noticeable. Even if you take 2014, and over this period, ten years, everything is happening in stages. Yes, there is no infrastructure in medicine, in education, some problems with utilities—**they are, were and will be, you can't get away from it. But globally, changes are happening for the better** in any case."

We see that many Russians who are far removed from politics are only partly more attentive and critical of the activities of local authorities than of the "big" government in the Kremlin. Indeed, they easily see "screw-ups" at the local level, unlike the "screw-ups" of big politics, but they are still in no hurry to blame the state for these "screw-ups." In the end, they reason, the authorities know what they are doing, they are trying, but can they cope with the numerous problems of Russian cities and villages? Taken to the limit, this logic leads some Russians who justify the war to the conclusion that the local problems are the fault of the people themselves—this is exactly how the chairwoman of the electoral commission in Cheryomushkin, whom we quoted above, put it:

> Q: If we're talking about the city, <…> what do you think has changed the most? What has changed for the better, what has changed for the worse?
> A: <…> What has changed for the worse? I think that **people have changed for the worse. The main problem is people**. There are so many who have completely incomprehensible moral principles, or lack them entirely. I mean, they can stand there, piss in a trash can, in some urn, in a public place where there are cameras everywhere. <…> Absolutely immoral actions and hatred of people. It's just something...for example, when the neighbors can't agree on something—and that's it [a conflict between them starts]. This hatred between them, now they'll take it to the grave! <…> **I think that people are the main problem in Cheryomushkin**.

It is significant that the main difference between ***confident supporters*** of the war and apolitical Russians who justify the war is not that the former are more active in expressing loyalty to local authorities. On the contrary, as we have already found out above, confident supporters can be very critical of the state's activities at all levels. They are distinguished by their very ability to connect what is happening "on the ground" with the policies of regional and federal authorities. For example, Leonid, a confident supporter of the war and a Krasnodar politician, discusses the problems of his city as follows:

> "I believe that the root of the problems faced by the **city, region and country** is corruption. Everything negative that we have to talk about now is, in fact, founded in corruption. We have the phenomenon known as the Musical Microdistrict [the official name of one of the districts of Krasnodar]. In reality, in five years, a hundred

> apartment buildings have been built there and not a single school, not a single kindergarten. Do you understand? **What, did the authorities suddenly forget** that if you build apartment buildings, then you need social infrastructure for them? I mean, even a complete idiot understands what we're talking about here."

The problems of one particular microdistrict among the many Russian cities are, in the eyes of this interlocutor, connected with the problem of corruption in Russian society and the state as a whole. However, confident supporters of war differ from opponents of war, who are also quick to point out the sources of local problems in the activities of the state, in one important respect. Opponents of war, when discussing local issues, blame not only the state, but also the war: because of the war, from their point of view, the authorities have fewer resources to resolve domestic issues. Confident supporters readily criticize the state, but remain silent about the role of the war.

***

In our previous analytical report, we described what so-called "apolitical support" for the war in Russia looks like. It is not so much support as a justification of the situation as the lesser of two evils; it is not consistent—the same people justify the war and at the same time criticize its individual aspects; it is accompanied by negative, not positive emotions. Apolitical non-opponents experience war as a natural disaster or a bout of bad weather—something that is simply silly to speak out against. Finally, they believe that only those in power have the right to make decisions regarding the course of the war—after all, ordinary citizens cannot know all the circumstances, and therefore must resign themselves and not interfere. In this section, we have shown that the logic behind this support did not spontaneously appear out of nowhere in 2022—for many years, Russians have been reasoning similarly about other unpleasant and incomprehensible decisions made by their government. They were used to expressing loyalty to the state mainly through non-interference, not because they agreed with its policies, but because any potential change seemed to them to be change for the worse. They tried not to think about what the state was doing, and when they noticed problems, they convinced themselves: firstly, "this is happening everywhere," and secondly, "the government knows what they are doing." And all this was because they felt quite correctly that their voices, their doubts, their discontent did not play any role, because "the state has its business, the people have theirs." Being slightly more attentive to local problems and the activities of local authorities, they, with some exceptions, applied the same logic: everyone is facing problems, the authorities are doing what they can, and in the meantime "you have to start with yourself." It is significant that those who, unlike them, confidently supported the war, being more politicized, tended to see their relationship with the state differently: they believed in the accountability of the state to the people on the one hand, and in the influence of state policy on local issues on the other.

In other words, for many apolitical Russians, war is just one of the state decisions that they have to deal with and accept. At the same time, it is notable that for many of them, there is something unique about the war: in their eyes, this is the only decision of the government that is not directed inward, at the citizens of the country, but outward at other countries, moreover, it is made "on

behalf" of the Russian people. This is why some non-opponents of the war justify the "special operation" with more passion and emotion than many other unpleasant decisions of the state.

In any case, this alienation from the state (and "politics") didn't happen in a day for many Russians. It was the result of a long process that many researchers, ourselves included, call "depoliticization" (you can read more about it in our book, *The Politics of the Apolitical*). Even in the late Soviet era, people's growing disappointment in the communist project led them to immerse themselves in their private lives and evoked a distrust of state policy and the public sphere. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a social upsurge: many people believed that they could change society for the better, and their disappointment in politics only grew in the mid and late 1990s. Since the early 2000s, President Putin has been building a vertical of power, gradually turning Russia into an authoritarian regime, and as in the case of many authoritarian regimes, power in Russia has relied on the support of a passive and demobilized population. Apolitical support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which may seem paradoxical—after all, it is accompanied by serious dissatisfaction, which instead of criticism leads to justification ("there are problems/wars everywhere," "the authorities know what they are doing")—is a logical consequence of these processes.

4.2.2 Opponents

Propaganda, repression and authoritarianism: a general view of the state and politics

Opponents of the war are people with a *stance*, they are more politicized than most non-opponents (with the exception, perhaps, of confident war supporters). However, despite the fact that many opponents are dissatisfied with the regime and have been reading opposition media for a long time, not all of them have experience *participating* in politics. Sometimes even direct contact with the state and politics, for example, through working in the city administration, may not be understood by opponents of the war as political experience, which is generally characteristic of people living under authoritarianism.

However, unlike non-opponents, opponents of the war are much more deeply immersed in both the news agenda and civil society in Russia. Many of them have experience in public work, for example, in the field of urban planning or culture. For some of them, this work has become a way to remain active, to realize their political ambitions without exposing themselves to the risks associated with political activity in a more narrow understanding. Thus, one of the interlocutors, a 46-year-old adviser to the director of a private company in Krasnodar, says in an interview:

> "Political life, of course, has nearly come to a halt, but at least we found some social life. You could say that the people who knew they couldn't move forward at the political level, they became public figures, activists, urban planners, and so on. This, in general, was good, they had some kind of outlet that allowed them to show their concern and their desire for change."

The political experience of opponents of the war may not only be openly oppositional (although most of them hold oppositionist views). In our field, for example, we met the head of a

cultural space sponsored by the regional government and a former government employee who both unequivocally condemned the war.

Some interlocutors also criticize the consequences of the war on Russian society, for example, the propagandistic "patriotic military focus" in the field of education. One of our interlocutors, a 29-year-old male teacher from Ulan-Ude Batod, talks about his professional experience:

> "This [history] textbook is a complete mess, and that's true for grades 5 all the way through 11. And as for the 'special operation,' and so on, the way it's represented [in the textbook] it's absolutely, it's just like on TV...it's as if they copied it down in writing and that's it."

Those with no connections to the education system also notice the propaganda: "I see how in schools, in daycares, educators and poor teachers have to fulfill all the orders from above, to conduct these patriotic [events]," complains a 53-year-old female accountant, also from Ulan-Ude.

Some opponents of the war divide society into the elite—the oligarchs and Putin on the one hand, and "us, the disenfranchised peoples" (f., 27 years old, Master's student, Ulan-Ude), on the other. From their point of view, the fight against the elite is fraught with repression, and this outrages opponents of the war. "Well, I'll tell you my point of view, when you go somewhere with someone [to protest], they'll just grab you for defamation and fine you," continues the 27-year-old Master's student from Ulan-Ude.

Opponents express dissatisfaction not just about the repression, but also the vertical power system itself, which prevents a representative of the people from being elected. According to the accountant from Ulan-Ude quoted above:

> "We've **never had decent leaders**. I understand, of course, that no one likes their leaders. But the one from Tomsk, Nagovitsyn [head and then president of the Republic of Buryatia from 2007 to 2017], he's a complete outsider, a man **imposed** by Putin. And everyone knew this perfectly well. Of course, I would like there to be someone more interested."

Finally, some opponents are unhappy with the state's economic policy. They can be divided into those who are left and those who are right—those who believe that the state does not do enough for the population, and those who believe that the state interferes too much in the market, harming the economy. Opponents who are dependent on the state, such as pensioners or educators, may complain about low social benefits, as this 72-year-old retiree, also from Ulan-Ude, does:

> "The pension is small. Even though I have a higher education, I worked as a chief accountant in the agricultural department. And that's how it is...at that time it was 7,000 RUB - 8,000 RUB, when I retired. Then they raised it [the pension payment], raised it, indexed it. The pension became 22,000. But even still, is it really possible to live on 22,000?"

Those who practice business criticize the social support offered to the population by the state. They see it as the cause of the economic problems. For example, a fragment of an interview with a 35-year-old female entrepreneur from Udurgh Village demonstrates this:

A: The most important issue is that there is a problem with job vacancies, people don't want to work at all. At all!
Q: And why do you think that is?
A: Any kind of social benefits cause problems. They're getting what, 60, 90 thousand.
Q: Do you mean child benefits?
A: Child benefits, Putin's benefits.

In any case, opponents of the war are also those who are critical of the state as a whole, and most often this critical attitude was formed within them long before the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Local problems, the government and the war

In a sense, this attitude towards war and the ability to problematize war (i.e., to present war as a problem) is a special instance of the ability to problematize the political and social reality around them. Those who consistently criticize war are often inclined to take a critical stance on the state's treatment of its citizens in general.

Opponents of the war, unlike supporters, tend to see social, economic, or local problems—say, a shortage of medical personnel or broken roads—as systemic problems. This view is expressed most clearly in the following excerpt from an interview with a 29-year-old businessman from Cheryomushkin:

Q: And if you were to generalize, what are the city's most pressing problems?
A: The city's most pressing problems? These are **not just problems of the city, they are also non-city problems**. They are problems with the entire system as a whole.

Opponents of the war usually easily describe the connections between what they and their fellow citizens do not like in their cities and regions and the behavior of the authorities, large federal businessmen, state laws, and so on. Konstantin, a cultural figure from Ulan-Ude, refused to speak on the record, but he spoke eagerly and at length about local problems. For example, he named the lack of regulation over the extraction of minerals in Buryatia as one of the key environmental problems facing the republic. "The Tugnui Coal Mine," Konstantin explained, "is Melnichenko [a Russian billionaire], whose fifth yacht has already been seized in Nice. And this is the guy who has left us with a bunch of diseases in the region." In other words, Konstantin finds it obvious that there is a connection between the health problems of local residents and the activities of the oligarch, who, by the way, is under international sanctions in connection with the war. When thinking about change, many opponents of the war point out that it must affect the whole of society, and start from the top, with the state—as, for example, this 42-year-old male construction worker from Cheryomushkin does:

A: ...if you change something in the city, then you have to change it at the top.
Q: Where is the top?
A: Well, let's start with the Sverdlovsk Oblast, with the governor <...>
Q: And the governor, accordingly, is appointed by Putin?
A: Yes, yes. We're talking about the very top.

Some (but far from all!) opponents of the war see the causes of local problems not only in state policy, but also in the war itself. Thus, the same construction worker from Cheryomushkin points to local problems, explaining his anti-war stance:

> "Then why are you bothering your neighbor at all, who has his own life? That is, another state. That is, maybe now we should also go to the Lithuanians, to the Poles and with a machine gun: 'Oh, you don't love us? We're going to do this to you now…' Well, that's nonsense! **Let's sort things out at home first. What's going on in our country?**"

We have already described above how opponents of the war criticize it (see section 2.1.1): the fact that the state is waging war instead of solving domestic issues, or even worse, that the war creates new problems, is one of the opponents' critical arguments against the so-called "special military operation." The words of a 72-year-old retiree from Ulan-Ude are another example of such criticism:

> "I'm always outraged that **so much money has been wasted on this war!** Couldn't **all this money have gone to Russia, so that we could have good roads?**"

At the same time, many opponents of the war, especially those who have no prior experience engaging in politics, criticize the war, as we recall from Section 2.1.2, for its senselessness and criminality, and not because it aggravates the socio-economic problems in Russia. For example, one interlocutor, a 30-year-old opponent of the war from Udurgh Village, is dissatisfied with the war primarily because the behavior of the Russian army demonstrates a cynical, immoral attitude toward human life. Interestingly, she also willingly discusses the connection between local problems and the war:

> "Yes, we have a lot of military servicemen and a lot of seasonal workers, because salaries are low in Buryatia. It is a subsidized region. Many say: 'Well they were the ones who became soldiers, let them work it off, go to war.' I've heard such awful things."

However, this connection in itself does not become the basis for this interlocutor's anti-war stance. Moral, general humanistic judgments are typical for non-politicized interlocutors, both opponents of war and those who justify it.

***

Thus, opponents of the war have different experiences with political and civic engagement, and understand the relationship between society and the authorities differently. Predictably, among those who disagree with the war, no one considers these relations to be "healthy": most opponents adhere to oppositionist views. They criticize the Russian authorities for their widespread militarized propaganda, authoritarianism, socio-economic problems, and for the war itself. Many interlocutors have political and social engagement experience, which to some extent predetermines

both their thinking about politics and their attitude toward the war. It is noteworthy that even those opponents of the war who work or have worked in government institutions do not become more loyal to the state than other interlocutors.

Regardless of their degree of politicization, almost all opponents of the war talk about the connection between local problems and regional or even federal policy. They tend to see "systemic" problems in urban problems. War opponents also view socioeconomic problems as being connected with political ones—for example, they may explain the poverty of the region by the fact that the governor was not elected, but appointed by Putin. Moreover, some opponents explain their dissatisfaction with the "special military operation" precisely by the fact that the state spends resources on waging war instead of solving domestic issues within the city, region and country. As one of our interlocutors put it, "let's sort things out at home first" (m., 42 years old, construction worker, Cheryomushkin).

4.2.3 Non-opponents and opponents: Comparison

Nobody expected Russia to attack Ukraine—events unfolded rapidly, and politically "unprepared" Russians had to decide unusually quickly how they felt about it. How they defined their attitude toward the war was partly predetermined by their previous experiences. Of course, state propaganda and many other factors had an influence. But a big role was also played by how people experienced, criticized, and justified the most varied, not always pleasant and understandable, decisions of their government in the past. This chapter helped us see that people with different attitudes toward the war were also accustomed to judging the behavior of local and federal authorities in exactly the same way.

One of the chapter's non-obvious conclusions is that confident supporters and confident opponents of the war are more similar to each other than either group is to apolitical Russians who justify the war (we first formulated this observation in our first analytical report). Both confident supporters and confident opponents of the war were more likely to have already been following political news at the time that the war broke out, were already familiar with the political agenda, had political sympathies and antipathies, and some even had experience in the political and civic spheres. War opponents almost always sympathized with the oppositionists, but among confident war supporters there were also critics of the authorities. The war has not made them loyal to the state–they continue to consider themselves oppositionists, but they "hang up" this criticism until the end of the war, allowing themselves to openly speak out only against local, not federal authorities. On the contrary, Russians who justified the war, but were not its confident supporters, were usually not interested in politics, did not follow the news, and did not have any specific likes or dislikes, at least before the war began.

It is not surprising that people who are far removed from politics are not overly concerned with the decisions their government makes. In their eyes, the state does not serve the people at all—on the contrary, it has its own interests, which are foreign and incomprehensible to ordinary people. At the same time, no country can go without a government—someone has to govern society and build relations with other countries. Even if they, ordinary citizens, think that the government's decisions are wrong, they immediately drive these thoughts away: firstly, the government knows

better and it is not for us to judge them, they convince themselves, and secondly, change always risks being change for the worse, so why not keep everything as it is? In other words, unlike opponents of war and confident supporters, apolitical non-opponents do not consider this state of affairs a deviation from the norm.

This is the logic we partly observe in their justifications for the war in Ukraine: the state (probably) had reasons to start it, and once it started, it needed to win— because an abrupt end and inevitable defeat would be an even greater catastrophe and would deprive the early years of the war of any meaning. Both confident opponents and confident supporters of the war are guided by a completely different logic in their attitude to the actions of the state: having been involved in political discussions for some time, they believe that the state can and should be accountable to the people, and citizens have the right to evaluate the actions of the state. Predictably, opponents of the war criticize the decisions of the authorities, and supporters can both criticize them and ardently support them. But the very ability to judge the state allowed them to form a very definite opinion regarding the Kremlin's decision to begin military action on the territory of Ukraine.

Regardless of their views on the war, many interlocutors are interested in the problems in their cities, regions and villages. All of them, including Russians far removed from politics, will not hesitate to express their attitude toward, say, the deficit of doctors in city hospitals or the endless traffic jams on the roads—which is, of course, negative. But while confident supporters and opponents of the war associate these problems with the activities of both local and federal authorities, their fellow citizens who are removed from politics and justify the war rarely attribute responsibility for these problems to anyone. They believe that local authorities are trying their best, but objective circumstances are against them, for example, the particular historical development of the city or the ignorance of its residents, preventing numerous city problems from being fully resolved.

Thus, those who had already acquired the habit and skill of evaluating the actions of local and federal authorities thanks to their developed interest and attention to politics were able to condemn or support the war quite quickly and quite definitely. Those who had existed in different worlds with the state for a long time, without trying to evaluate its actions ("after all, we are little people, and those at the top know better"), partly transferred this logic to their judgments about the war. It is important, however, not to forget that it was the state that consistently cultivated in Russians a dislike and mistrust of politics, feeding on the fruits of passive loyalty and non-interference.

4.3 Chapter 7. "Traumatic news": Media consumption related to the war

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the perception of information and the effectiveness of propaganda have remained one of the most discussed topics in both the scientific and expert-journalistic communities. Calls to "burst the bubble of Russian disinformation" and give Russians access to alternative media have not led to significant changes in public opinion. Numerous initiatives that rely on modern technologies to combat propaganda have also failed to do so. One of the reasons for this ineffectiveness is simplified ideas about how people consume and perceive information, especially in the context of a military conflict. In order to demonstrate the specifics of this process, we will talk about the practices of media consumption and the specifics of Russians' perception of information about the war, as well as how they have changed over time.

In our first and second analytical reports, we described the main trends in media consumption and the perception of political information at the beginning of the war and six months later. At the beginning of the war, confident supporters relied more on pro-government sources, while opponents relied on opposition media. However, both were interested in news coming from the opposing camp. Apolitical Russians distanced themselves from the news agenda overall, feeling that they could not make sense of the influx of contradictory information. This trend intensified six months later. Apolitical non-opponents of the war began to distance themselves even more from the news, preferring to trust their acquaintances rather than the media. More politically involved opponents and supporters also felt discomfort, but mainly from the feeling of bias in the information from the opposing side. Therefore, they began to consume media that aligned with their viewpoints, even though they understood that these sources are also biased. But what has happened since then, as the war continues to rage on?

Our new ethnographic study not only addresses this question, but also examines how information consumption is embedded in people's everyday lives. Below, we describe the sources our interlocutors use, their media repertoires, the connection between information consumption and other everyday practices, and strategies for distancing themselves from the news flow.

4.3.1 Non-opponents

Russians who justify or support the war receive information from a variety of sources. Some of them rely solely on online sources, others supplement them with television news, and some prefer to read and watch only materials sent to them by their loved ones. At the same time, among our new interlocutors, there are practically no people who regularly receive information from television news. They say that they only watch television when someone else (a family member or someone they are visiting) turns it on. It is also important that those who are not against the war watch, read, and listen not only to pro-government media, but also to opposition media.

What they won't tell you on TV: (Dis)trust of the media

The majority of non-opponents of the war are skeptical about political information, no matter which side it comes from. They certainly believe that opposition sources are covering the war in a

distorted way, but, according to them, pro-government media cannot be fully trusted either. From our interlocutors' point of view, distortions may consist of the deliberate hushing up of important information, which is practiced by both opposition and pro-government media. As a 26-year-old male doctor from Krasnodar notes in an interview:

> "To lie well, you have to **keep the truth from being told**. That is, I am not saying that all channels, both federal and 'independent,' have only one lie. It's just that **some parts of the truth are not always agreed upon**."

For many interlocutors, the idea that the media cannot be trusted is self-evident, something they do not think about or question. For example, when discussing trust in the media, a 55-year-old male construction worker from Krasnodar says: "I simply have not thought about it. Trust? There is no point in trusting the media, they dance to someone else's tune." Therefore, many answers to the question about trust in the media are categorical and emotional: "No, I do not trust the media at all" (m., 29 years old, entrepreneur, Novonekrasovsk), "I don't trust [news] sources at all!" (f., 35 years old, entrepreneur, Udurgh). The fact that someone—for example, our researcher— is asking about their habit of trusting the media may even outrage interlocutors: could anyone really think that they do not know there is fake news and propaganda all around, and that the media manipulates people?

In our previous reports we showed that, counterintuitively, television, which expresses the official state position on the war, is trusted only by a small group of interlocutors who justify or support the war. Most of them see television news as propaganda and do not trust it. In the current study, we observe the same thing: among sources mentioned by non-opponents, television news has a special "anti-rating."

It is significant that only one of our interlocutors, Tamara, a 30-year-old teacher from Novonekrasovsk, admitted that she watches Channel One and trusts it, because this channel is "central, so everything there is true." This method of assessing credibility is a clear example of the "authority heuristic" well described in studies and is often a mechanism for forming trust in television news within Russia: intuitively reducing the efforts that could be spent on analyzing the information itself, people rely on the reputation of the institution to which this source belongs—on the authority of the state.

However, this type of attitude is becoming increasingly rare among those who are not against the war. As Maxim, a 21-year-old college student from Cheryomushkin, notes, "What they show on the news—don't believe it, not a single word." And a 38-year-old employee of an additional education center from the Udurgh Village in Buryatia explains the logic that makes her distrust state channels:

> "They [Channel One and Channel Two] are state-owned. Accordingly, **whatever the government says is what they show**. That is, **their information is still one-sided** and I don't know what's really going on."

Moreover, when mentioning the TV, non-opponents often use negatively coded words, such as a "boob tube" (m., 75, local historian, Novonekrasovsk) or "complete hogwash" (m., 21 years old, college student, Cheryomushkin). And on the inverse side, not having a television at home is often

considered a good thing ("I don't have a TV at home, thank God." f., 23 years old, unemployed, Krasnodar). One ethnographic diary excerpt in which the researcher recounts the conversation she had with a massage therapist during their session in Yuzhny Sokol, Krasnodar Krai illustrates this well. When the conversation turned to the topic of trusting the TV, the massage therapist begrudgingly admitted that she watches TV news. In response, the researcher did not judge her, but the woman nevertheless began to justify herself, and with noticeable irritation: "So I watch the news. So what? Who says I trust it? I don't trust the news—I just watch it. And what should I do, read about it on the internet? It's full of fake news!" Even though she evidently watches TV and even reproduces propagandistic clichés (for instance, about "fake news" on the internet), she is not willing to admit that she trusts TV news. This is why she gets upset, asks a series of rhetorical questions and forms an argument in her defense, saying that online sources are even less reliable than TV. This situation demonstrates that regardless of whether or not they actually do trust TV news, many people see trusting it as something reprehensible, and even the question of whether they trust TV news is perceived as an expression of doubt in their intellectual abilities.

interlocutors name two main reasons why they do not trust television—both are related to the biased, propagandistic nature of broadcasting. The picture of a successful "special military operation" that the news and talk shows paint on television, from their point of view, does not correspond to reality. While these rose-colored stories about the war might have still been considered credible when it first began, now, nearly two years later, their lack of credibility has become clear even to Russians who justify the war. For example, student Maxim from Cheryomushkin discusses the contract soldiers who who went to fight under the influence of this positive image of the war:

> "**On the news, they only show the good stuff**—nothing scary, they're shooting from tanks, no one's put in the line of fire. **But in reality**, you're sitting in a trench, three meters away is another moron sitting in a trench, he chucks a grenade and it's over. I don't know…[military service] is **seen through rose-colored glasses**, in short. The state, the government—I don't know who puts them on our face. But we're all wearing them."

Another reason non-opponents give for distrusting state media is a strong sense of bias, which appears due to the excessive politicization of broadcasting in their eyes, as they are often far removed from politics. For example, according to a 55-year-old construction worker from Krasnodar, "There is no point in trusting the media, they dance to someone's else's tune." He gets this feeling from the fact that opinions dominate over information in the news cycle: "Basically, I think that the media should simply provide information, nothing more. Not express any opinions of their own." Since the beginning of the war, non-opponents have become familiar with the broadcasting of Russian opposition media and Ukrainian media, which are also highly politicized—and this has only increased their mistrust of both. As a 38-year-old female designer from Krasnodar notes, "It's the same thing. Both of them say the same thing about each other! I've noticed. Don't they? 'You are Nazis!' 'No, you are Nazis!'"

This distrust of television, however, does not mean that interlocutors trust online sources more. According to a security guard from Krasnodar, if you turn on TV, then "according to the information they give, we have already defeated Ukraine three times and destroyed everything there."

But if you turn on YouTube, you still won't get access to reliable information: "There's something like 'Freedom' or '24'—but they [the Ukrainian army] are already in Moscow. What's the point of listening to them, watching them?" As another 33-year-old resident of Krasnodar, an engineer on maternity leave, notes:

> "I actually don't believe anything anymore, because there's always some sort of propaganda [on TV]. Telegram channels are the same thing. In fact, as my husband rightly says, **you don't know who to believe**."

While television is perceived as unreliable due to state censorship, online sources are perceived as unreliable because each author can spin and distort information so that it corresponds to their political position. For example, the previously mentioned massage therapist from Yuzhny Sokol speaks of the internet as a "nasty" "garbage dump" and a "madhouse", since "anyone can write whatever they want." Russians who justify and support the war question both the independence of "independent media" ("Who can guarantee that any media outlet is independent?" m., 45 years old, IT specialist, Krasnodar) and the independence of Ukrainian sources that express the position of the Ukrainian government ("There is a mass war in the media, first of all, they are whipping up tensions on both sides." m., 56 years old, security guard, Krasnodar).

As a result, it turns out that non-opponents of the war trust information coming from specific people most of all—their relatives or acquaintances, for example, those who have been in the combat zone (on the Russian side) and are living in the LPR/DPR or in the unoccupied Ukrainian territories. "If you know people from the LPR and DPR, you understand how things are there. And you hear it straight from people, not from the news, how they present it to you," explains the engineer on maternity leave from Krasnodar, whom we quoted above. She says her fellow countryman, a 26-year-old male doctor from Krasnodar, tries to find out information "from people who are there," meaning acquaintances fighting in Ukraine. As we conducted our research far from Moscow and St. Petersburg, often in small towns, we found that most of our interlocutors have acquaintances who are fighting or have fought, even if they are only superficially acquainted with them.

These "folk" sources evoke more trust and often contradict the official media narrative. The losses are "not talked about on TV"—this information is "passed along through word of mouth by friends and relatives" (f., 43 years old, museum worker, Cheryomushkin). Distrust of pro-Russian propaganda, however, does not undermine the effect of this propaganda. Even if the words of friends call into question individual facts that are covered in Russian news, those living in eastern Ukraine are themselves subject to the influence of the propaganda machine, and among Russian military personnel there are hardly many consistent critics of the war. Accordingly, their opinions more often reinforce the general propaganda line.

"Here we have our own lives, there they have theirs": Information consumption strategies

Many tend to imagine people as ideal consumers of information, who, for example, read important news and do not read unimportant news. But research shows that information consumption is often determined by convenience: for example, people use Yandex.News not because the aggregator

provides important political information, but because they at one point decided to create an email address on Yandex. We were able to identify three factors that determine media consumption strategies: habits and convenience, the influence of social context, and significance for everyday life in a particular community.

The first filter through which political information passes is people's habits and the convenience of access to the source. For example, it turned out that a security guard from Krasnodar, who admitted to distrusting TV news, still watches it. Why does he consume TV news despite his distrust? Like many post-Soviet citizens, he is used to watching TV in the background during dinner: "I watch [TV] when I eat, of course. It's on in the background." Similarly, the consumption of information from online sources is often determined by the convenience of access. The "Top" section of Yandex.News allows you to save effort on searching and reading information and quickly get a general idea of key events in the country and around the world. As a 43-year-old female museum worker from Cheryomushkin notes, "I usually read Yandex.News in the morning to briefly find out what's happening in the country, what's happening in the region."

This is why the government's efforts to block opposition media remain an effective tactic. Of course, many Russians, including those who justify the war, understand that the state censors information, but, for instance, they may lack enough interest in news overall to use a VPN often to access news from blocked sources. According to Denis, a 26-year-old doctor from Krasnodar, he stopped reading Meduza because "it's only been working with a VPN lately, it was blocked. Because of this trouble, I rarely go there—I have to go through the trouble, find a VPN, turn it on. I usually don't have time for that."

In addition to habit and convenience, another important factor determining the way people consume information is the influence of other people, especially family and friends. Once again, we find that those who claim to have no trust in TV news actually watch the news when others watch it. "You go to your grandma's, she's watching the news, you can listen to everything there, they tell you. There's Rossiya 1, they always broadcast the news there," says a 25-year-old female student and private clinic administrator from Ulan-Ude.

Finally, the perceived relevance of the information also influences consumption strategies. Often people read the news to understand what is happening in their particular community, find topics for conversation with others, plan spending, and so on. Therefore, many people, especially those living in small towns far from the capital and not interested in politics, prefer small local media. For example, a 43-year-old museum worker from Cheryomushkin says in an interview:

> "Vkontakte has everything—news, a page for the city, the administration, it's just called 'Cheryomushkin.' You can read gossip in there too. Like everywhere else, everyone has an 'Overhead in…' section."

Our interlocutors admit that they generally trust local publications. They think that it is difficult to fact-check coverage of a distant war, while verifying reports of events happening nearby is easy. After all, as a museum worker from Cheryomushkin puts it, in a small town "You can't lie or hide anything. In your own city, you'll still find out the truth anyway."

We have revealed what factors influence the ways in which non-opponents consume information, but what are the ways in which they consume information? Over time, ***apolitical Russians***

who justify the war but are not confident supporters become even more disinclined to read news on their own, believing that they will get the main points from their loved ones anyway.

Information from the media seems useless to them, because it is either unreliable, cannot influence the course of events, or does not concern their daily lives. A cultural worker from Cheryomushkin admits that she has not watched the news for almost two years, because "everything [information about the war] is so filtered by the time it's included in anything [media reports]. <...> We will never have accurate information about what is going on there, no one will ever." For one 27-year-old IT specialist from Krasnodar, the uselessness of the media is determined by the fact that consuming it does not give him any political leverage: "There is no point in following political events for me, because whether they're encouraging or not, I can't do anything about it." Many simply feel that information about the war does not concern them directly. As a 50-year-old community theater actress from Cheryomushkin explains, "It seems to me that we have our own lives here, and there [in the war zone] they are leading their own, entirely separate lives."

In addition, they perceive information from the media as traumatic—it evokes negative emotions that are difficult to handle. The feeling of political disempowerment aggravates this trauma. According to non-opponents who are removed from politics, in order to read information about the war, "you need to be in good health and have strong nerves" (f., 51 years old, education worker, Krasnodar)—and in life, "this negativity is always present" (f., 29 years old, bank employee on maternity leave, Novonekrasovsk). According to a 57-year-old female sales worker from Krasnodar, reading news about the war "knocks me out so much that when I realized that it had started to affect my work, I started dosing it out."

As a result, Russians who are removed from politics and justify the war either limit their information consumption or disconnect from the news flow, although sometimes they receive news from their loved ones. We observed all these trends six months to a year after the start of the war, but in the fall of 2023 they only intensified.

In addition, compared to the early months, and even a year after the start of the war, interlocutors now are more certain that the most important news will reach them through relatives and friends without their active participation. Thus, a 36-year-old resident of Krasnodar explains that her husband "knows everything that's going on. The first thing he does in the morning is read the news. If anything critical happens, I have someone to ask." This feeling serves as an additional argument in favor of why regularly following the news in today's troubled world is not at all necessary.

Like apolitical Russians who justify the war, more politicized, ***confident war supporters*** experience negative emotions when consuming information about it. For example, Tamara, a 30-year-old teacher from Novonekrasovsk, regularly checks the "Top" page of Yandex.News, reads Telegram channels, and sometimes watches TV news. However, all of it only upsets her: "All the terrible news depresses me, of course. And you try to protect yourself from it, of course, if possible." But, unlike more apolitical Russians who justify the war, Tamara continues to force herself to follow the news about the war, "because you still have to somehow support this whole ideology of courage." By "ideology of courage," she means the need to support the Russian state and army in war conditions. In other words, Tamara continues to power through and follow unpleasant news for political reasons.

Given the general initial dilemma, we can identify two different strategies for handling information that are characteristic of confident war supporters: they either try to compare sources with different positions—pro-government and opposition—or consume information predominantly from pro-government sources, despite knowing that they are biased.

By comparing information from different sources, many of them try to get a "complete picture of the world." Thus, Leonid, a 39-year-old local politician from Krasnodar who considers himself a supporter of the war, claims that he reads both more or less neutral media (RBC, Kommersant) and pro-government media (Izvestia). But at the same time, he also follows some opposition channels on Telegram and watches Ekaterina Shulman's program:

> "I, for instance, enjoy watching Ekaterina Mikhailovna Shulman. That doesn't mean I agree with everything she says. But when I watch her program, 'Tuesday Status Report,' I have food for thought."

Since we do not have the opportunity to observe our interlocutors' daily news consumption, we cannot say whether they actually do compare sources. In previous analytical reports, we suggested that such statements demonstrate an attitude of mistrust towards the media rather than a real practice: some of our interlocutors were sure that they approached information critically, but nevertheless reproduced propaganda clichés.

As was the case a year ago, some confident war supporters refuse to consume opposition media, despite the fact that they do not trust pro-government sources. The fact is, coming up against information that does not correspond to their view of the war causes them to experience unpleasant emotions. For example, a 53-year-old female teacher from Krasnodar says that she used to try to supplement her consumption of RIA Novosti, RT and the Telegram channels of "war correspondents" with Meduza news, but then she stopped doing this:

> "When I start reading something so strongly oppositional, sometimes I even **have to make an effort to finish reading it to the end**, because I see nonsense every other line. And I see a **dismissive attitude towards myself** as a consumer of information, because I understand that there is, of course, some truth, into which they have crammed so much that I read simply to understand. But sometimes I just have to make an effort to finish reading some opposition blogger or opposition media outlet, something on Echo, or some little article in Meduza."

But wouldn't their understanding of the bias of pro-government media prevent them from consuming information exclusively from these sources? In fact, many confident war supporters do not believe in the possibility of some kind of "objective," "correct" coverage of events: they believe that any side can only tell its own version of events. This conviction allows them to make a choice in favor of an agenda that is closer to their own. As a 57-year-old female sales worker from Krasnodar notes:

> "I can't say that it's hard for me to take one side or the other, because... **I've chosen [a side] for myself** <...> My country is in a military conflict, **but it's still my country, my homeland**. I won't change my attitude toward my homeland."

In other words, even if the information from the sources she consumes calls the legitimacy of Russia's actions into question, her patriotism will determine her attitude toward this information, and not the other way around.

***

Thus, already within the first year of the war, we began to notice that the abundance of contradictory and unpleasant information surrounding the topic led many confident supporters to refuse to read sources of various political orientations (which they did in the first months of the war). Apolitical Russians who justified the war began to distance themselves from the news altogether. In the present study, conducted almost two years after the beginning of the invasion, we see an increase in these trends.

Those who are not against the war continue to claim that they do not trust the media, and television in particular. Ordinary citizens, such as acquaintances living in the LPR/DPR or fighting on the Russian side, seem to them to be more reliable sources of information. But despite the fact that the latter may criticize certain aspects of the media coverage of the war, they still adhere to—and spread—pro-government views. In addition, although they do not trust the media in general and TV news in particular, those who are not against the war use them out of habit or convenience: they check the Top page of Yandex.News and watch TV "in the background" or accidentally, when visiting someone. Thus, despite their declarative distrust of pro-Russian propaganda, Russians who justify the war do not turn into critics of the war.

The regional focus of our research helped us see the popularity of local media, especially for non-war opponents who are removed from politics: local sources report on things that directly concern people and seem more reliable, since the information can be verified through personal experience.

Politically removed Russians who justify the war but are not committed to it continue to distance themselves from consuming news about the conflict. They view such news as useless (i.e., consuming it has no effect on the situation) and traumatic. Non-opponents of the war rely even more on their loved ones than before to inform them about important news when it occurs.

Unlike apolitical Russians who justify the war, some confident supporters claim that they still try to consume information from sources on different sides. Others, however, admit that they have abandoned this practice and returned to reading media that are politically close to them. Since they believe that there is no right or wrong version of events, and that any version is determined by the political preferences of its creator, they choose the version that is close to their view of what is happening.

4.3.2 Opponents

Unlike Russians who justify or support the war, most opponents get news about the war from online sources and social media. However, they also reduce their consumption of news about the conflict, relying, for example, on brief summaries instead of reading full news stories. Both pro-government media and Ukrainian publications are disappearing from their media repertoires: both

are perceived as propaganda that doesn't bring any practical benefit. At the same time, opponents of the war admit that they read "war correspondents" and "Z channels" because the latter contain valuable information, since moderators have access to the front lines.

Trust, but be wary: (Dis)trust of the media

Like Russians who justify and support the war, opponents of the war are skeptical of the media. Of course, we are not surprised that Russians who consistently criticize the war do not trust TV news. They extend this mistrust to other official media, such as newspapers or online sources. As one 27-year-old female Master's student from Ulan-Ude notes, "I can't stand propaganda [media], this lie, this hypocrisy. I read it and I'm just seething. Like, 'everything is fine with us, incomes have grown, everyone is living it up, living in luxury, our salaries are 60 thousand.'" Accordingly, opponents of the war believe that if such media sources do not provide reliable information, then "there is no point in listening to state [media]" (m., 44 years old, freelancer, Krasnodar). In those rare cases when interlocutors mention Ukrainian sources at all, they often consider the latter to be no less propagandistic than pro-government Russian sources. "I read a couple of Ukrainian public pages, like UNIAN, and **some other trash**," admits one 34-year-old private company director from Krasnodar.

Compared to non-opponents, opponents of the war are expected to express less skepticism towards opposition media. But they also treat the latter with a degree of mistrust and caution. For example, one 29-year-old entrepreneur from Cheryomushkin often watches Yuri Dud's channel, but notes that Dud' conducts himself not without bias:

> "He [Dud'] has this thing where he basically sometimes suggests a certain position to a question, and it's as if he's programming a person for a certain tone. That is, sometimes he seems to be asking, but at the same time he's leading a person in a certain direction, like this—whoosh—and he's led them down a certain path."

This mistrust is also clearly visible in the words of a 30-year-old female education worker from Ulan-Ude:

> "I noticed that **independent media outlets still exaggerate, add and subtract things**. Sometimes my relatives from other countries write: 'What's going on over there? Is it really [like that]?' But in reality, it's not. And you understand that **in both places, they can add their own spin**."

Nevertheless, opponents readily admit that they read "all sorts of things like Meduza, BBC—things like that" (f., 67 years old, retiree, Novonekrasovsk), not always feeling the need to make a reservation that the media should not be trusted. These sources are perceived as more reliable than all the others.

Finally, unlike non-opponents, opponents do not rely on information from acquaintances who are at the front or living in the LPR/DPR. This is likely due to the fact (and we have already written about this in our previous report) that many opponents of the war consider their relatives who justify the war to be "victims of propaganda" and try not to discuss politics, while usually

maintaining relationships with them. In this situation, even acquaintances who have seen the war with their own eyes cannot act as authoritative sources of information about the war—after all, "victims of propaganda" cannot have an unbiased view of events.

"I like this format": Strategies for information consumption

As with non-opponents of war, the amount of attention opponents' pay to political information is determined by its convenience, what relatives watch or read, and what friends recommend or forward to them. For example, a 34-year-old researcher from Krasnodar admits that she listens to BBC podcasts because this format allows her to consume news without setting aside time to read it:

> "Since February 24, 2022, they [the BBC] have been making daily podcasts. They usually touch on everything current, related to the war—and generally just current events <…> I mean, I like this format. Even when I was working, it was important for me—I get up in the morning, I drive with headphones on, I listen."

Convenience plays a key role here—this interlocutor would probably consume less opposition information about the war if it were not available in a format convenient for her. Or another example: a 44-year-old blogger from Krasnodar says that he watches the programs of Yuri Dud', Irina Shikhman and Katerina Gordeeva not so much because of their oppositionist views, but because of the cultural and entertainment component of their broadcasts:

> "I also watch Dud'. Not everything. **I just like when he has musicians and artists** [on the show]. I pick and choose interviews [to watch] with Gordeeva, Shikhman. I watch the actors, some artists."

People's political knowledge and views can be shaped not just through direct media influence, but also unintentional contact with information through others. For example, during a group interview with members of a family in Ulan-Ude, a 72-year-old retiree explains how she came to reject the war:

> "Sometimes in the morning **my daughter turns on a journalist for me**. What's his name? Maxim Katz, Varlamov—that's what I watch. <…> What's going on in Ukraine, what's going on in Russia. Every time I already believe, I'm convinced that <…> Putin behaved very wrongly. How could he do that? Attack Ukraine like that?!"

Finally, in addition to habit, convenience, and the role of others, the relevance of information to their daily lives influences the way war opponents consume information. Therefore, opponents of war, just like non-opponents, often prefer regional and city media rather than federal sources. As the aforementioned researcher from Krasnodar explains, she "subscribes to some local Telegram channels on social networks that deal with city life and news. We learn more from there."

Having established what determines how war opponents consume information, we can move on to the next question: in what ways do they consume this information?

War opponents who are not overly politicized, like non-opponents, tend to reduce their consumption of political news, including news about the conflict. Much of the information about the war seems useless to them because it does not concern them personally or the communities around them. For example, we tried to talk about Prigozhin's mutiny with most of our interlocutors. The thoughts expressed by some war opponents on this topic are indistinguishable from the thoughts of non-opponents: why follow this kind of news, they explain, if it does not affect our lives in any way? In addition, information about the war seems traumatic to them, even more so than to non-opponents. This is "terrible news" (m., 41 years old, mechanic, Novo-Nekrasovsk), our interlocutors claim, and "the psyche can no longer handle listening to all this" (f., 53 years old, accountant, Ulan-Ude). Finally, some of our war opponent interlocutors refuse not so much to consume information about the war in general, as to read opposition and anti-war (!) sources. They feel frustrated by their observations that not only pro-government, but also opposition sources are largely biased. Here is how a 44-year-old male blogger from Krasnodar explains it:

> "At first, I got really hyped up on information from, like, Meduza, the Moscow Times. At some point, I just realized that my brain was probably boiling because **they also have their own agenda, they also show things from one side** all the time. **realized that I don't need it**. I mean, I'm just boiling, I mean, it's to the point of a mental disorder, to the point that I'm sitting in my yard gardening and talking to myself, trying to explain things to myself. <…> Or, let's say, I'm talking to my parents in my head. That is, I'm trying to explain something to them. At some point, I think: 'Why?' I don't explain it to them in person, because it's pointless, but at the same time, I'm trying to prove it to them in my head. Since the New Year, **I've distanced myself greatly from the news**."

It is notable that this interlocutor refuses to consume news from opposition sources, not because he disagrees with their position (in fact, he agrees with it), but because the excessive politicization of the agenda makes him think endlessly about the war and experience psychological discomfort. This is why he pays attention to bias—it seems to him that he is being "hyped up" with one-sided information.

As a result, this segment of war opponents limits their consumption of information about the conflict or completely disconnects from the news cycle. The interlocutors compare their news consumption at the beginning of the war compared to fall 2023 and note these changes themselves as, for example, a 31-year-old female doctor from Novonekrasovsk does:

> "Back then, when it just started. At that time, I was subscribed to many news channels. And I tried [to choose] channels with different points of view, and I subscribed to these [ones] and those ones. Then I got tired of it, I realized that I was starting to panic, and I didn't need all that. I unsubscribed from most of them. But there were a couple left, and I scrolled through the news there."

For a 43-year-old female private clinic employee from Ulan-Ude, these changes were even more radical:

> "Recently I decided to disconnect from all news channels, **I blocked them all, deleted them all**, because **they have a very negative effect on me**. It has an immediate depressive effect."

Like non-opponents, some opponents are convinced that they learn the most important news from their loved ones one way or another. While justifying his decision to stop following political news, a 31-year-old male dentist from Novonekrasovsk explains: "If it's something important, it will reach me. I'll know if something happens."

Some ***more politicized opponents of the war***, like confident supporters, try to consume information "from different sides" in order to overcome media bias. However, this is a relatively rare strategy. More often, politicized war opponents admit that they follow not the official pro-government media, but more radical sources—"war correspondents" or "Z channels"—which, as interlocutors believe, have privileged access to the situation at the front. For example, a 34-year-old male private company director in Krasnodar reasons in an interview:

> "Because there's important information on the Z pages. I mean, Fighterbomber [the channel of a retired Russian military pilot] writes that if a pilot or crew dies, then it is clear that something happened. Kirill Fedorov [a pro-government military blogger] is also constantly posting...How do I find out about arrivals in Krasnodar Krai? Every morning at 4 a.m. I open Kirill Fedorov's channel, select the latest post and periodically update it. And there are always comments saying 'And there was an explosion heard in Sochi,' or whatever. That's where you can get all the information, his subscribers write to him, who are from Sochi, from Krasnodar, from other places."

As we see, despite posting content with views that are not at all sympathetic to war opponents, these sources, unlike state sources, are still seen as useful to many of them. Politicized opponents of the war feel competent enough to separate the wheat from the chaff—factual information about what is happening at the front from the pro-war views of war correspondents. They find nothing of use in official state sources, which report nothing but propaganda clichés, and therefore do not deem it necessary to waste their time on them.

***

In the first months of the war, opponents, compared to Russians who justified the war, were less radical in their mistrust of the media: counterintuitively, it was mainly supporters of the war who spoke about media manipulation, while opponents admitted that it may be possible to rely on the authority of quality publications. Almost two years later, on the one hand, this balance has been preserved—and now, opponents of the war trust the media slightly more than non-opponents. On the other hand, over time, opponents of the war have become more distrustful: for example, they admit that not only pro-government, but also opposition media can be biased. In addition, while at the beginning of the war its opponents tried, albeit with difficulty, to follow the "scary" news, now many of them are disconnected from the news cycle or limit their intake, seeing no benefit in information about the military conflict and experiencing negative emotions from it. They are

upset not only by the propaganda news from state sources, but also by the reports from opposition, anti-war media—the latter seem to "bombard" them with bad news, creating a sense of bias.

Compared to the beginning of the war, pro-government and Ukrainian sources have practically disappeared from the opponents' media repertoires—they see both as useless propaganda. If opponents do follow information from the "other side," they do so through the Telegram channels of "war correspondents" and "Z channels," which have access to the front line and provide more "facts." Finally, when consuming any information, opponents focus on convenience, their habits, and the relevance of this information to their everyday lives—that is why we see not only federal media in their repertoires, but also small regional or city media sources.

4.3.3 Non-opponents and opponents: comparison

The influence of the media is considered one of the most important factors that shapes both support for autocratic regimes overall, as well as attitudes toward the regime and the war in Russia. It is much more complex in structure than simply imposing a certain picture of the world on gullible citizens. If that were the case, we would not be able to explain how, in the conditions of a saturated media space in which people have access to the same sources of information, some turn out to be critics of the war, while others justify it. Differences in the perception of the war, of course, are the result of a complex intersection of different factors—propaganda strategies, general attitudes toward the media within the country, political involvement and personal views, a sense of political agency or disempowerment, etc.

Both opponents and non-opponents of the war consume information in many similar ways. At the beginning of the war, many non-opponents quickly distanced themselves from the influx of traumatic news, while opponents, conversely, tried to overcome their discomfort and follow the news, so as to not forget that there is a war going on and simply return to living a normal life while others are suffering. Two years later, this distinction has almost disappeared. Now many Russians, regardless of their attitude to the war, try to protect themselves from traumatic news about a situation they cannot influence. Tired of conflicts with the loyal majority and feeling the futility of resistance, opponents of the war do not abandon their views, but deliberately depoliticize, trying to live a "normal life" (we write about this in more detail in Chapter 2.1.2).

Among both opponents and non-opponents of the war, the degree of politicization varies. Those who are less politicized turn away from the news because of the traumatic nature, uselessness and bias of the information. Regardless of their attitude to the war, they believe that if something really important happens, they will find out about it anyway. At the same time, they do not stop reading local media, since the latter report on what directly concerns them. More politicized Russians, both supporters and opponents of the war, still overcome their own discomfort and try to follow the news. However, the majority of our interlocutors of any viewpoint or degree of politicization prefer to consume the information in a format that seems convenient to them, or to which they are accustomed, or which their loved ones consume.

At the same time, of course, opponents and non-opponents have different attitudes towards news consumption. Although both groups are, by their own admission, reluctant to accept information from the media at face value, it is non-opponents of the war who are particularly dogmatic

in their assertion that the media should not be trusted under any circumstances. Most likely, this is because the idea of distrust of the media has itself become part of state propaganda in Russia—this is where we constantly hear about "fake news," "disinformation", and how Western and opposition media deceive gullible people. Opponents of the war, while talking about the bias of opposition sources, can at the same time admit that they rely on their authority. Counterintuitively, when the rhetoric of distrust becomes a propaganda tool, distrust of the media—at least in words—becomes a feature of the regime's supporters, and trust becomes characteristic of its opponents.

Many Russians who are disinterested in politics, both opponents and non-opponents of the war, do not trust the media and rely on other people as sources of information about the conflict. However, for non-opponents, these sources are primarily relatives from the L/DPR and acquaintances who fought or are fighting on the Russian side. Since the latter most likely share the pro-government views of the non-opponents, information from their mouths more likely reinforces the effects of state propaganda.

The feeling of media bias, which is common to both opponents and non-opponents of the war, can lead to opposite actions towards sources from "their own camp." Feeling the bias and "constructed nature" of both the pro-government and opposition agendas, confident supporters of the war often conclude that there is no such thing as completely "objective," "correct" media coverage in principle. As a result, they choose the agenda that is closest to their own, and consume information from pro-government sources, ignoring alternative ones. Opponents of the war, sensing that their "own" opposition sources are fixating on the conflict, may refuse to read these sources, since the excessive politicization of the agenda makes them think endlessly about the war and experience psychological discomfort. Ultimately, however, both seek to adapt to the circumstances of the war and learn to live a normal life in an abnormal reality that they did not choose, but which they are powerless to change.

4.4 Chapter 8. Uncertainty in the present and ideas about the future

In the spring of 2022, many in Russia expected the "special operation" to end quickly. However, it soon became clear that the war—along with the mobilization decree that came into force in September 2022—was going to drag on indefinitely. This uncertainty undermines the confidence of many Russians in the future, while the ongoing war threatens both their own future and the future of the country. In our first and second analytical reports, we wrote about the fact that opponents and non-opponents of the war have different ways of looking at the future. At the beginning of the war, non-opponents were more or less optimistic about how it would affect Russia, while opponents were preparing for the worst. Six months later, uncertainty became the most oppressive factor for both. At the same time, Russians who justified the war—even those who said they did not like it—began to hope Russia would win, seeing defeat as a possible catalyst for dire social and economic consequences. It is now clear that for most Russians, regardless of their attitude toward the situation, the protracted war has led to changes in their lives that were impossible to predict.

How do opponents and non-opponents cope with uncertainty today, a year and a half after the war began? Do they see the future and plan their own lives differently? Finally, how have their expectations and visions of the future changed compared to the first year of the war?

4.4.1 Non-opponents

Planning for the future beyond "politics"

Non-opponents can be divided into three groups, depending on how they feel about their future. The first group includes those who, in conditions of uncertainty, refuse to plan their private lives and live with the feeling that everything could change any day. The second group includes those who acknowledge the existence of circumstances that bring uncertainty into their lives and which they cannot change, but plan their future despite this. Finally, the third group includes those who ignore uncertainty and make plans as if there is no war. This group includes all confident supporters of the war: they worry least about the future and make plans most confidently, even those that seem unrealistic in the current situation. At the same time, even those who ignore uncertainty, especially when they are young men, take the consequences of the war (for example, the fact that they cannot avoid compulsory military service) into account when planning their careers.

Of course, among non-opponents and opponents alike, there are those who, by their own account, have never planned anything. However, most of our interlocutors either directly or indirectly connect their unwillingness to look into the future and plan with the war, as, for example, is well illustrated by this short fragment from an interview with a 57-year-old female sales worker from Krasnodar:

> Q: Over the past couple of years, has the scope of your plans for the future changed at all?
> A: Yes. **I try not to make any predictions**.
> Q: And it wasn't like that before?
> A: It wasn't like that before.

Both those who make plans despite uncertainty and those who refuse to plan speak of this uncertainty as something that has an external source and is therefore beyond their control. Our interlocutors most often see the state and its unpredictable policies as such a source. As examples, they cite not only episodes directly related to the war (such as Prigozhin's "rebellion"), but also recent government decisions, such as raising the retirement age. Thus, while answering a question about his vision of his own future, a 55-year-old construction worker from Krasnodar says:

> "To be honest, I don't look towards it. **I tell everyone that I'd like to survive the next five years first**. Some people tell me: 'You're getting a pension.' I say: 'They've already postponed my pension for the third time, I'd like to live until I actually receive that pension.' Now I have to live to 65, and by the time I make it to 65, I'll have to live to 70 to see it. So what five year plan are you talking about? **I don't make life plans—I make plans for the next week, month, whatever. But five years—that's out of the question, especially in our country**."

Some of our war-justifying interlocutors try to plan in spite of uncertainty, in a sense resisting it as much as they can. For example, one interlocutor, a 38-year-old fashion designer from Krasnodar, describes her strategy this way:

> "I have no idea [what the future will bring]. In five years, since my daughter is going to enter a ballet school, I would like to be in Moscow again, helping her. This is the plan. Overall, my plans include working and raising children. **But when you know that you're on the edge of the abyss, it seems like, will all this happen?**"
> Q: Have the scope of your plans for the future changed since… [the beginning of the special military operation]
> A: At first it changed, but then my psyche returned everything to its place. It's not like the kids are going anywhere, and they help me stay afloat—my mental health, that is. I mean, I still have to take them to school, give them an education. I've even been recalling all that literature, in any hard times, those who forged on even in the nineties, those who didn't go to the market, but continued to conduct science or study, it still turned out later that: 'Oh, guys, where are you? We're over here.' They will still be needed later, all these people. **Basically, we're just thoughtlessly continuing to work and study, and sincerely doing everything, accomplishing everything that we can. Those are the plans**."

For many, uncertainty has become a new norm, albeit frightening. When our interlocutors say that "it has always been like this" and try to find new survival strategies (for example, shorter-term planning and planning "in spite of"), they are, in fact, trying to normalize uncertainty. We already wrote about one of these strategies in our previous analytical report. Many Russians justifying the war said then that the sanctions imposed on Russia did not scare them because they already had experience of surviving in the 1990s. We saw something similar in our latest interviews. For example, here is how a 59-year-old retiree from Krasnodar answers the question about confidence in the future:

> "I have always relied on myself, first and foremost. **As for politics, I understand that I can't influence anything, but I know that I will live through any situation**. I'll go to war if I have to, I'll wash floors if I have to, I'll plant potatoes in my garden if I have to—I don't give a damn. I know that I'll survive in any situation. Because we've already survived in several situations. When it was the 90s, I remember—we really had nothing to eat. There really were empty shelves!"

Are there any aspects of the future, perhaps not connected with the state, over which war-justifying Russians still feel control? Yes: the most diverse aspects of private life. A certain future is connected above all with study and work, children, buying or building a home, with a pension, grandchildren, leisure, including travel. For young men, one of the most stable points of certainty is military service. It is perceived as an inevitable part of their lives, and therefore it can either be lived through or turned to one's advantage (for example, by volunteering for the front or continuing a military career after). Here is how, for example, an 18-year-old college student from Novonekrasovsk talks about his future:

> "First of all, to finish my studies. [In six months] go to the army. Most likely, as a volunteer. And then, in the overarching perspective, so to speak—find a job and live a civilian life. Well, **I divide it into the period before I go to the army and after**."

Another college student, 21-year-old Maxim, who works part-time at a café in Cheryomushkin in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, explains: "I have prospects in military service. I want to get a good rank so that I can retire early."

It is interesting that when answering questions about how they see their future, some interlocutors do not mention the war at all—this is the third group in the classification above. This group also includes all confident war supporters (but not only them). They talk about their plans as if there is no war. Some do not have the feeling that their opportunities have been limited—for example, one of our interlocutors is planning an exhibition of her paintings in France, another—life somewhere in Norway in the future. It is important, however, to understand that they have not lost the ability to see the reality around them—on the contrary, they see this reality, are afraid of it, but want to hope that the war will not affect their lives in any way. This is why they actively convince others—and themselves—that this is possible. This is an excerpt from an interview with a 23-year-old unemployed girl from Krasnodar:

> Q: How do you see your future in five to ten years?
> A: I sincerely hope that I really will not be here, but somewhere abroad. **And everything will be fine for me, all these wars will have ended long ago, they will not affect me in any way**.
> Q: Where abroad, for instance?
> A: I'd like to live somewhere in Norway.
> Q: Do you want to [go] there to study, to work, to get married?
> A: First to travel, then just to see which spot is best.

Thus, when thinking about their personal future, non-opponents of the war seek to separate their private lives from larger political events. Those who report an inability (or loss of ability) to plan because of the war have no idea how or when this period of uncertainty will end. Others make personal plans despite the uncertainty or even ignore the war, trying to regain control over their lives and sometimes hoping that the war will pass without consequences for them.

Waiting for "stable stability" within the country

Our interlocutors who justify or support the war also think differently about the country's future. Some of them cannot imagine Russia's future in principle. Others imagine negative scenarios of the future, associated with a worsening situation inside the country due to the conflict moving into a more acute phase or due to the consequences of the war. Finally, others hope for the best, associating it primarily with the end of the war and a return to stability.

As we already know, many apolitical Russians who justify the war perceive the state, the actions of the government, and the war as events beyond their control. This is why they have difficulty imagining any kind of future for the country. In our previous report, we wrote that over time, many Russians began to perceive the war as a kind of natural disaster, as something beyond their control and that they cannot influence. This same attitude affects their reasoning about the future of Russia. For example, our researcher had an illustrative conversation with a 29-year-old businessman from Novonekrasovsk, who, by his own admission, is not interested in politics and does not take it upon himself to judge who is right and who is guilty in the war:

> Q: Do you have an idea of the future of the city and the region in five years?
> A: None at all!
> Q: And the country?
> A: No. It could change like that. I see my own [future] and I am moving towards it. The country's—no.
> Q: Not the city's either?
> A: No. **If I could have such global influence, then yes, I would see it**. Not now.

Since war and politics for these people are something that happens outside their control, and the state is responsible for politics, it turns out to be the source of uncertainty for many of our interlocutors. In other words, delegating responsibility for the war to politicians, which we wrote about in our first analytical report, makes the future of ordinary people more unpredictable, because due to the war, their private lives are directly connected to the decisions these politicians make. The figure of Putin in this context proves ambiguous. He has always been the main guarantor of certainty ("Putin knows what he is doing"), and remains so in the eyes of many to this day. However, he too could disappear from the political scene, and then the last bastion of certainty will fall. Here is the reasoning of a 38-year-old female employee of the supplementary education center in Udurgh Village:

> "I don't know [how the special operation will end]. **That's up to big politics [to decide]**. Basically, ideally, we should live in peace <...> Perhaps, if we'd had other

> politicians, then maybe this situation would have developed differently. Now, if something happens to Zelensky and someone else takes his place, what will he do? **Or, God forbid, if something happens to Putin, how will this new leader turn things around?** It seems like a difficult question. Plus, we will never know the whole truth. It is hidden from us in any case."

But many non-opponents still imagine various scenarios for the future of their country. Negative scenarios of such a future are associated with the fear of escalation of the war or the return of dissatisfied military servicemen to Russia. Some of these scenarios include, for example, the criminalization of the population and an economic crisis. In a sense, the main fear of war-justifiers is the continuation of the war in a new capacity, within the country or with the involvement of new external participants. And the best positive scenario is the end of the war. We already wrote about this paradox in our previous analytical report, and a year later it has only intensified. For example, a 33-year-old cultural worker from Cheryomushkin, who generally justifies the war, at the same time reasons:

> "And if some global conflict happens, something large-scale, political…We will face another devastation. And we will 100% start living worse than we are now. **Therefore, I would like for everything to end as soon as possible and for us to start living again**."

At the same time, non-opponents are, as expected, more optimistic than opponents, even though they have to make a conscious effort to force themselves to hope for the best. This "best," both in relation to their own future and the future of their loved ones, and in relation to the future of the country as a whole, is primarily associated with the end of the war. At the same time, none (!) of our interlocutors can explain how exactly the war might end and what "victory" might look like. "The end of the war" is a phrase that does not have any specific content, but at the same time signals the end of a period of uncertainty, after which, as one of the interlocutors put it, a "stable stability" will set in (f., 51 years old, education worker, Krasnodar), and it will be possible to "start living again" and make plans (f., 33 years old, cultural worker, Cheryomushkin).

The dynamics of future perspectives

At the very beginning of the war, the Russians who justified and supported it were still able to talk about the future, including the future of the country and possible scenarios for ending the conflict. Over time, they have lost the ability to imagine anything concrete. They fear that something worse than the current war awaits them, but at the same time they hope that the war, no matter how, will end and everything will return to normal. Then they will finally be able to think about a variety of scenarios, but for now they are trying to cope with uncertainty as best they can.

Another important change in the perception of the future by war-justifying Russians is their uncharacteristic view of the state—and Putin—as a source of uncertainty. Over time, the war has come to be seen by many non-opponents as a natural disaster, but it was the state that was supposed to "bring order" and win it. Now, however, the state itself is becoming a source of instability for

them, primarily because its main guarantor—Russian President Vladimir Putin—no longer seems eternal. Our interlocutors still hope that "they," that is, the politicians led by Putin, "know what they are doing." But this hope coexists with the feeling that "we don't know what is happening." And if those in power lose their positions, the future of the country and its citizens will become even murkier.

***

The uncertainty that the war brought to the lives of ordinary Russians remains one of the main problems for those who justify or support the special operation. Those who are not against the war deal with this uncertainty in different ways: they normalize it ("it has always been like this"), ignore it, or try to plan their lives in spite of it.

When thinking about the future, non-opponents tend to separate their private lives, various aspects of which, especially those related to family, are amenable to planning, from major political events. For young men, one of the most stable points of certainty is military service. It is perceived as an inevitable part of their lives, which they are forced to fit into their future trajectory one way or another.

Unlike their personal future, which, at least in the eyes of the most optimistic non-opponents of the war, can be controlled, the future of the country seems to them to be out of their range of influence.

Accordingly, non-opponents have lost the ability to imagine any specific future for their country. In our previous analytical report, we showed that the main fear of war-justifiers is a Russian defeat, leading to an internal crisis, or the continuation of the war in a new form, inside the country or with the involvement of new external participants. However, over time, even negative scenarios have lost some specific features. The best scenario for the way events might develop for war- justifying and supporting Russians, almost two years after it began, seems to be simply the end of the war and, along with it, the uncertainty. Our interlocutors have difficulty imagining how exactly the war should end. The most important thing for them is that as a result, the lives of ordinary people can continue as if the war had never happened.

4.4.2 Opponents

Personal is political

Many anti-war Russians who left the country in 2022 have returned. Others have remained abroad indefinitely. Most opponents of the war have not even tried to emigrate, preferring to integrate into the new reality of wartime Russia, isolate themselves from it in anti-war communities, fight it, or engage in so-called "internal emigration" (see Section 2.1.2). The feeling that the war is here to stay has a particularly strong effect on its opponents, making it difficult for them to plan their own future.

When discussing personal plans, opponents start from their own, often pessimistic assessment of the prospects for peace with Ukraine and the political situation in Russia. For example, a 43-year-old doctor from Ulan-Ude explains:

> "Unfortunately, it is impossible to plan anything **now**. It is scary to plan even for the next few months. **While before we planned little trips, purchases**, we had plans, things like that, **now it is just**...I myself am faced with the fact that if I plan anything specific, I'll have to completely change them. There is such uncertainty now, as scary as it may sound, but now, in our country, it is scary to plan anything—it is impossible."

This inability to plan trips is probably related to international sanctions (EU countries bordering Russia have banned entry for Russians with tourist visas) and the risk of Russia closing its borders. The fear of planning purchases (most likely large ones) is related to the economic instability that the country may plunge into during the war. Although the above statement does not mention the war, the repeated use of the word "now" in comparison with how it was "before" indicates that the difficulties in planning personal life are specifically related to wartime.

Predictably, male opponents give up planning for the future because of the threat of mobilization. While some of them consider spontaneous relocation, others speak only of a feeling of helplessness and anxious anticipation—as seen, for example, in an interview with this 41-year-old male mechanic from Novonekrasovsk:

> "There is tension about what will happen next and how it will all end. **I am afraid for myself**, for my children, about what will happen next. **They'll declare a general mobilization**, or something else. Either this will all end soon, or something else will begin. Thus, as they say, **there is no stability**. Therefore, **it's very difficult**."

Once, when our researcher asked an interlocutor the usual question about plans for the next 5-10 years in an interview, the 46-year-old adviser to the director of a private company in Krasnodar, answered ironically: "Maybe 5-10 days!" And then he told a joke: "During a job interview: 'Tell me, where do you see yourself in our company in five days?' 'Days?!' 'Well, such are the times.'"

Political uncertainty leads war opponents to the idea that it is impossible to look confidently into the future. Being ready to change your life radically and not making long-term plans—this is the dominant attitude of war opponents. Moreover, they reflect on this attitude, metaphorically painting a picture of personal and social paralysis caused by the military "shock-freeze," as a 43-year-old male doctor from Ulan-Ude put it.

However, not all of our interlocutors find the uncertainty of the future difficult to plan around. More politicized interlocutors reflect on the prospects of emigration. For example, a 27-year-old master's student from Ulan-Ude, an opponent of the war with experience in opposition activism, considers anti-war protests to be futile and also associated with high risks. She also considers her own emigration in this context, noting that it is easier for those abroad to remain politically active:

> "**I want to get out of here**, so that I have no memories of it. What will I do? **I won't [be able to] do anything**. They could still just put me in jail, slap a fine on me. And who would support me? No one is going to support me. <...> I really like Vladimir Osechkin, Gulagu.Net, the human rights organization. True, he's also abroad. You see? **You can only do this abroad. But not here**."

Young men who are against the war often talk about emigration in connection with the risk of a new wave of mobilization. However, despite their readiness to act, they also look to the future with pessimism—after all, this emigration will be forced and may be unsuccessful. Thus, a 29-year-old businessman from Cheryomushkin reasons:

> "I think that if a second wave of war breaks out, **I'll already**…I understand, of course, that this **probably will be a super dangerous step that will end in failure**. Because many who leave like this, they never find their footing over there. And there is a high probability that we will not find our footing there either."

Our interlocutors also admit that they are considering emigration due to fears of the country becoming completely isolated, like North Korea, and the risk of reprisals against them personally.

It is telling that some war opponents, like non-opponents, talk about the uncertainty of the future (including the prospect of a nuclear strike) while at the same time making family and professional plans: having a child, opening a business, and so on. Many opponents choose, as one 50-year-old female resident of Cheryomushkin put it, "to adapt."

Regardless of what specific strategies for the future war opponents share, they always consider their own lives relative to the war and the unstable political situation. This is a characteristic feature of the reasoning of war opponents, who, as we have shown earlier (see Section 2.2.2), tend to understand both personal experience and social problems through the prism of politics.

The end of the war (and Putinism)

Although war opponents by definition want the military hostilities to end, few of them believe in the possibility of finding peace quickly. Moreover, as they largely adhere to oppositionist views, war opponents rarely talk about the possibilities of democratization in Russia. Opponents' ideas about the future of the country are quite far from the image of the "beautiful Russia of the future," a peaceful and democratic country.

Reflecting on the realistic prospects of the war, opponents expect the conflict to become "sluggish" (f., 27 years old, Master's student, Ulan-Ude). Even those who believe in the possibility of reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine in the future speak about it with no optimism. For example, a 27-year-old single mother from Ulan-Ude, the widow of a Wagner PMC fighter (whose husband voluntarily went to war from prison, which she learned about only after the fact—and, of course, did not approve), now left without state support, shares her thoughts on the end of the war:

> "In the end, they will find some kind of compromise, some kind of deal. And then, once again, they'll toss us aside—widows, dead guys. Well, like the Chechen war, Afghanistan—that's how it will be."

Other interlocutors point out that the war will have long-term internal consequences, and even compare the post-war period with the 1990s. This is an excerpt from a group interview with members of one family from Ulan-Ude, the remarks of a 72-year-old retiree and her 40-year-old daughter:

> Interlocutor 1: This war is basically pointless, it's just horrific!
> Interlocutor 2: The mobilized men will return, a lot of criminals.
> Interlocutor 1: So many criminals!
> Interlocutor 2: And crime, the criminal element will start to flourish. I don't want a child [refers to her grandchild who was present during the conversation] to grow up around all this. One of my children also grew up in the 90s, when we saw this kind of crime as well.

It's worth noting that our interlocutors in Krasnodar Krai focused most acutely on the post-war political and administrative performance of both countries—which may be either accidental, because our choice is not representative, or intellectual due to the fact that they live on the cusp of the territories, where military actions are performed as demonstrations of superiority. Thus, some of them expect that there will be litigation over Crimea, the L/DPR will become independent, and the so-called "new territories"—the Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts—will return to Ukraine (m., 34 years old, journalist, Novonekrasovsk) or will begin to maintain relations with an unpredictable outcome (m., 46 years old, advisor to the director of a private company, Krasnodar).

It's worth noting that our interlocutors in Krasnodar Krai focused most acutely on the post-war political and administrative performance of both countries—which may be either accidental, because our choice is not representative, or intellectual due to the fact that they live in such close proximity to the military hostilities. Thus, some of them expect that there will be litigation over Crimea, the L/DPR will become independent, and the so-called "new territories"—the Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts—will return to Ukraine (m., 34 years old, journalist, Novonekrasovsk) or will become the subject of negotiations, with an unpredictable outcome (m., 46 years old, advisor to the director of a private company, Krasnodar).

In any case, most war opponents believe that the war will only end if Putinism does—after all, Putin refuses to go to peace talks. As a 29-year-old businessman from Cheryomushkin says:

> "It's just that if things continue to go badly, there will come a moment when someone will overturn things, and there will be some kind of change of power. I think this is a more likely outcome. That's how it is. Because they won't back down. They most likely won't go to peace talks either."

However, in the eyes of war opponents, the end of Putin's presidency will not automatically lead things to quickly change for the better. For example, a 42-year-old male construction worker from Cheryomushkin imagines that the president may change quite soon, but tangible positive changes would not occur until his (the interlocutor's) small daughter was an adult:

> "**Nothing will change**. Even if we imagine that we got a new president tomorrow, it would still be another two or three years... <...> in 20, 30 years, when I'll be 60 already, and [my daughter] Alisa will be almost 30, and she'll have spent her entire conscious life in this mess."

Some war opponents are also less than optimistic about not only the speed but also the possibility of changes for the better after Putin leaves office. Like more apolitical non-opponents,

opponents may doubt that anyone that much better than Putin would come to power. According to a 72-year-old retiree from Ulan-Ude:

> "What other person could they appoint... <...> Well, everyone says that even if Putin leaves and does something, and maybe, well, anyway, they say, they will appoint people from their own circle."

However, while non-opponents usually assume that "people from Putin's entourage" may prove worse than Putin himself and therefore let things remain as they are, opponents certainly still want these changes, although they do not believe that they will happen quickly and painlessly.

Thus, war opponents see a speedy end to the war and a change of power as the desired scenarios for the future. However, these scenarios do not seem realistic to them. They expect both the military conflict and Putin's rule to drag on. But even when the latter cease to exist, war opponents believe, society will have a long way to go to achieve real change for the better.

The dynamics of future perspectives

In the first months after the full-scale invasion, we interviewed war opponents, war supporters, and those who were still undecided, and spoke about their ideas about the future. These ideas are described in our first analytical report. Even then, war opponents did not believe in quick changes for the better, although they dreamed of them. Has anything changed since then?

In our first analytical report, we wrote: "Opponents of the war are those for whom the war has become an existential threat. Their entire life is put under question—and under attack." On the one hand, this is still relevant today: opponents still cannot fully plan their lives and are in survival and adaptation mode. On the other hand, viewing their experiences in the first months of the war as something out of the ordinary and, perhaps, temporary, now seems to them to be the "new norm." Of course, a few have learned to make personal plans in uncertain circumstances, but many have become accustomed to living without planning anything long term.

At the beginning of the war, opponents were deeply affected by the worsening economic situation—the first consequences of Western sanctions and closed borders. They believed this situation could become even worse in the future. These expectations were not justified after a year and a half: the Russian economy managed to stabilize and war opponents had new fears. Therefore, economic worries no longer color interlocutor's conversations about the future—instead, they are afraid of complete isolation, such as in the case of North Korea; a new, larger wave of mobilization; or even nuclear war.

***

Opponents of the war cannot imagine their personal future as separate from the political situation in the country. A protracted war with no clear outcome deprives them of the opportunity to make plans for the future and they get used to living in a short-term planning mode. Many feel completely paralyzed, while others think about possible radical life changes, such as emigration.

However, even those who think about emigration imagine it as the lesser of two evils, feeling that they would have a hard time in a new country.

Most of all, war opponents, of course, want the war to end. But they seem to have lost the ability to hope or dream about it: they do not imagine positive scenarios for the war ending and do not believe in the possibility of a wonderful future for Russia, at least in the coming years. They do not talk about what this future could be like (even if it doesn't happen soon). Instead, they reflect on negative scenarios, for example, the grave consequences of the war for society or Putin being replaced with someone from his entourage. In other words, the pessimism of the first months of the war has not gone away for war opponents—they have simply learned to live with it.

4.4.3 Non-opponents and opponents: Comparison

Neither those who oppose the war nor those who justify and support it have any hope in it ending anymore. Both have developed different strategies for continuing to live in a state of uncertainty. The strategy common to both groups is "planning in spite of"—an attempt to live as "normal a life" as possible, focusing primarily on caring for family, work and children. However, both opponents and non-opponents live with a sense of a life "postponed," waiting for the period of uncertainty associated with the war to finally end, and then it will be possible to begin to live for real again.

At the same time, war opponents and war justifiers tie their own future to the war in different ways. War is much more present in the lives of opponents: it not only introduces uncertainty, but also pushes them to make decisions that they do not want to make (for example, forced emigration). Russians who justify and support the war also suffer from uncertainty, but at least some of them are able to distance themselves from the war and talk about their personal future in isolation from the political future. In this context, it is important to note how differently war opponents and non-opponents perceive the possibility of another wave of mobilization or compulsory military service. For opponents, both are unacceptable and therefore introduce even more uncertainty into their lives. Non-opponents, on the other hand, have come to perceive military service as an inevitable part of their lives, which, if possible, should be used to their advantage, or at least simply survived.

War opponents have a pessimistic outlook on Russia's future. They believe that even if the war ends, it has already led to irreversible consequences for the country. Non-opponents have more positive assessments of the future, but they are also more removed from reality. It can be assumed that Russians who justify and support the war are making a conscious effort to force themselves to hope for the best. Some of them also fear the negative consequences of the war, and one of their greatest fears is that the war will not end, but will move on to a new stage. At the same time, they want to believe that the war will pass, as if it had never happened. And the future will be the same as life was before the war—the same plans, travel, and stability.

Finally, war opponents and justifiers have different attitudes toward the possibility of regime change and/or Putin's departure from the presidency. Opponents want a change of power, even if they do not believe that it will necessarily bring positive consequences; for non-opponents, a change of power is another factor that will only increase uncertainty.

5

Conclusion

We often have to answer questions about the state of Russian society during wartime and Russian perceptions of the war. The more time passes since the beginning of the war, the more ordinary citizens end up at the front and die—does this not outrage Russians, do they not become truly dissatisfied with what is happening? The families of mobilized and contract soldiers who remain in the backlines receive significant amounts of money, especially by the standards of small towns (either salaries or funeral money)—does this make them more loyal to the war? Residents of Russian border territories increasingly come under fire—does this set society against the Russian state waging war? Or, on the contrary, against Ukraine? Or maybe the residents of Russia have become so accustomed to what is happening that they have long since stopped caring?

Public discussions of Russia still depict two drastically different images of the country. On the one hand, the Russia of recent years is often presented as a mobilized, rapidly ideologizing society with fascist and militaristic features. Its citizens are supposedly ready to march in formation and support any decision the authorities make. On the other hand, Russia is often considered a particularly cynical and apathetic society, whose members are indifferent about the misfortune of others and are not interested in anything except their own well-being.

In the fall of 2023, with the goal of understanding what is really happening with Russian society in wartime, we went on research trips to three Russian regions—the Sverdlovsk Oblast, Krasnodar Krai, and the Republic of Buryatia. Over the course of a month, three of our researchers became part of the communities in these regions. Conducting ethnographic research, they observed how people talk about the war and how it affects daily life in the cities and villages. In addition, our researchers recorded sociological interviews with local residents. As a result, we were left with three detailed ethnographic observation diaries (more than 100,000 words apiece) and 75 in-depth interviews at our disposal. We managed to collect truly unique data that provides an idea of what people say and think about the war in everyday situations, and not only when answering researchers' questions.

So what did Russian society prove to be: mobilized and militarized or cynical and apathetic? Naturally, neither image is correct.

When preparing this report, we asked each of the three researchers who had visited three Russian regions to select a quote from their materials that reflected the most important feature of the reality they observed. The researcher who had visited the city of Cheryomushkin in the

Sverdlovsk Oblast sent in: “If it weren’t for the funerals, we wouldn’t even remember the war.” The researcher who had returned from the Republic of Buryatia suggested: “It’s as if there is no war.” The researcher who had visited Krasnodar Krai chose: “The war didn’t affect us specifically, but the fear remains.”

These three quotes share not one, but two similar features. They present the war as something unworthy of attention, insignificant and uninteresting to ordinary citizens. But each quote also contains a hint that the reality of war conflicts with the desire to ignore it and still impacts the lives and experiences of Russian citizens (“*if it weren’t for* the funerals,” “*as if* there is no war,” “*but the fear remains*”).

In Russian wartime society, there are two *opposing* trends that at the same time *reinforce* each other. The tension between them largely determines the perception of the “special operation” almost two years after it began. On the one hand, the formerly extraordinary nature of the war is giving way to normalization: the war is gradually becoming something ordinary, another unremarkable part of the surrounding world. In a sense, many Russians resist both the Kremlin’s attempts to turn ordinary citizens into ideological supporters and the attempts of the anti-war liberal opposition to force society to actively experience guilt and fight. On the other hand, the war constantly reminds us of its existence, creating new threats, new anxieties, and new reasons for discontent in Russians.

5.1 “It’s as if there is no war”

This phrase became the leitmotif of our ethnographic research in the Russian regions. It is unsurprising that this report contains a wealth of evidence of how the war is gradually ceasing to be something extraordinary and is being pushed to the periphery of Russians’ attention.

Thus, the war is disappearing from public spaces in populated areas. The amount of pro-war (and especially anti-war) symbols is decreasing, the war is neither discussed in public places nor, with rare exceptions, in local online communities. People are not only afraid to express an unfavorable opinion and face the consequences, but also feel that such conversations are inappropriate. Our researchers also felt this discomfort when they tried to talk to people about the war.

The cultural life of various cities and villages clearly shows that the war has not become a source of new ideas and does not imbue cultural events with new meaning. On the contrary, it is integrated into the usual, well-established formats of cultural life. The content of the slogans displayed on posters and heard from the stage is rarely truly pro-war, or even war related. Let us recall one of the events in the Buryat village of Udurgh, where during his speech, one official used a slogan coined in connection with Russia’s military actions in Ukraine (“Buryats don’t run”), but imbued it with everyday, peaceful meaning—Buryats do not give up and achieve success in their endeavors. And the opening number of the concert with the pointed title “We Don’t Abandon Our Own” in the city of Cheryomushkin in the Sverdlovsk Oblast was the song “Happy Birthday” – simply because a line from the chorus said: “You will reach that star, and rejo-o-o-ice in your v-i-i-i-ctory!” (in other words, the fact that the speech was clearly about the birthday girl or boy’s personal achievements and had nothing to do with military victory did not bother the organizers of

the concert). Ideologized events like Father Konstantin's "prayers for soldiers" in Cheryomushkin or Denis Abramenko's lectures in Krasnodar gathered a specific narrow audience.

Different types of military volunteer activity and collective assistance to the front that exist in Russian wartime society are usually cited by commentators as an example of the mobilization of society—they say that many Russians not only mentally support the war, but also invest their time and labor into it. However, conversations with volunteers, and especially observation of their activities, show that they are driven not by their confident support for the "special operation," but by completely different motives. For example, for some, volunteering is a way to help loved ones who are on the front lines; some are trying to feel in control, to cope with helplessness; many are attracted by the emotions of working shoulder to shoulder on an "important cause"; and some, especially those in small, close-knit communities, cannot refuse to participate, since refusal would be a violation of the social norm and an expression of disagreement with the majority. We encountered the most unexpected motives for participating in volunteer activities—for example, one of our interlocutors brought her mother to weave camouflage nets, explaining that "working with her hands would be good for" her elderly mother. While working, volunteers do not discuss war or politics, rather discussing topics that are close and relatable to them: prices, pensions, families, or stories related to the volunteer centers themselves.

In spontaneous, natural conversations with each other (and not in response to survey questions), Russians rarely discuss the overall goals and causes, criminality, or justifications of the war. People are more concerned with the impact of war on their everyday lives. When they talk about the war, they mostly talk about the same things they discussed before the war: everyday difficulties (certain products have disappeared from the shelves, the nearest airport has been closed for a year and a half), money and morals (prices have gone up, someone's husband died and the widow immediately bought a car with his funeral money), relationships (the husband went to war, and the wife ran off with another man). Men more often discuss topics that are considered "masculine" in society, such as the technical side of war, and women usually talk about "feminine" topics, such as how war destroys families. What Russians do not talk about is who exactly is responsible for these changes in their lives. The government waging the war disappears from the overall picture, and the difficulties that people face in their daily lives because of the war do not lead them to reconsider their attitude towards the political regime in Russia.

Regardless of their view of the war, many Russians are increasingly distrustful of political news from a variety of sources, due to its politicization, ideological content (which becomes a sign of "untruth"), and focus on the war. Instead, they trust local media. Local issues and news covered by these media sources seem more important and relevant to them.

Overall, people with very different views of the war, both apolitical Russians without a clear position and, for example, opponents of the war, do not feel able to influence anything. Therefore, they are increasingly distancing themselves from the situation: they reduce their news consumption and try to live a "normal life" without thinking about the war. They understand that they cannot change government policy, but they retain at least some control over their private lives—and therefore they are increasingly immersed in it. This tendency is not unique to wartime Russia—it is characteristic of most authoritarian regimes. Within the first year of the conflict, we observed such distancing from the reality of the war among apolitical Russians, but now even confident oppo-

nents of the invasion experience something similar. Tired of feeling powerless and arguing with the majority, which remains loyal to the authorities, they accept the new reality, while continuing to internally condemn the war.

When it is impossible to ignore what is happening—for example, the news of the death of a loved one or drone fragments falling on a nearby street—many try to normalize these events. In sociological jargon, to *normalize* means to present something extraordinary as ordinary, normal, using a number of rhetorical techniques. "People die in civilian life too. I don't think it's a great catastrophe," our interlocutors reason, and also "drones fall everywhere," "there is always a war going on," and there is nothing to talk about here.

Despite all these similarities, the war is perceived slightly differently in different regions. The peculiarities of each region's views are influenced, for example, by the number of military units and colonies from which prisoners are recruited, proximity to the combat zone, the prosperity of the region and the availability of decent jobs, the density of social ties, the circulation of news transmitted by friends from the front, etc. In other words, the differences in perceptions of the war are determined mainly by what distinguished the peculiarities of life in the regions *before* the invasion of Ukraine.

Many apolitical Russians continue to justify the war if they are asked whether the "special operation" is justifiable in principle (as we remember, when communicating with each other in natural situations, many people simply do not ask these questions). However, firstly, specific arguments and justifications (war as a response to the NATO threat, protecting the people of Donbass, fighting against Ukrainian fascism, etc.) are not of primary importance for many of them: sometimes they may turn to one argument, sometimes to another. They do not so much believe in these propaganda ideas as they are trying to justify Russia's actions overall and, thus, save their own face, because they take the accusations aimed at their country personally. Secondly, not the content, but the forms of these arguments are not something fundamentally new: Russians have previously justified other incomprehensible and unpleasant government decisions similarly (for example, various reforms), which they could not influence, but the consequences of which they nevertheless had to deal with. For example: "the government knows better," or "this is happening everywhere," or the general "you need to start solving problems yourself." It was this familiar logic of justification that later began to be applied to the war in Ukraine. Finally, despite the fact that Russians may periodically use ideological cliches to justify the war ("this is a war of Russians against Russians," etc.), such language is more "foreign" than "native" for them. They do not live in the world of the Kremlin's imperial ideas, but in the familiar world of national states, in which Ukraine remains a foreign, separate state, and Ukrainians are a different people.

In the first months of the war, Russian society was divided into different camps, with conflicts occurring regularly. These conflicts could run within families, romantic couples, and friend groups. After only six months, Russians began to avoid discussing the war with each other in order to avoid conflict and maintain their relationships. Despite this, internal disagreements within close relationships only intensified. Now we are seeing a new trend. Russians who justify the war are becoming more critical and increasingly doubtful of official explanations for the conflict, while some confident war opponents are becoming less dogmatic and are beginning to understand the reasoning and actions of those who justify the war. For many Russians, the shared experience

of living through a difficult situation within the country is becoming more important than their differences in views, because they understand that none of them can influence it. This awareness provides new grounds for solidarity despite these differences in views.

This, however, does not lead to increased cohesion. Instead of arguing, people withdraw into themselves, afraid to share their concerns with loved ones, because it is not customary to discuss the war. When death comes to the family, this tragedy remains private and there is no one to share it with. "It feels like the war is only happening within our family," the wives of mobilized soldiers, with whom we spoke as part of another research project, regularly complain. At the same time, residents of the village of Shebekino in the Belgorod Oblast are unsuccessfully trying to attract the attention of Russians to their fate: "Shebekino is Russia!" they shout on social networks. Since the war is pushed out of the public sphere and has, over time, come to be experienced as a private event, and not a common misfortune (or joy), ultimately, everyone is left to face it alone.

People feel uncertain about their future due to the protracted war (more on that below), but they develop different strategies to cope with this uncertainty and continue to live normal lives. Many learn to plan despite the uncertainty, focusing on what they can control: work, family, friends. Others—mainly war-justifying Russians—try to normalize the state of uncertainty by convincing themselves that earlier, for example, in the 1990s, things were even worse.

Thus, the war rather "suspended" society than brought it to some radically new state. It did not turn the Russian population into confident supporters and did not produce new forms of sociality. While in the first months of the war, many Russians perceived it as something extraordinary, over time, feeling that they were unable to influence the situation, people began to distance themselves from the reality of the war, trying to lead a normal life, simultaneously turning the war into a part of it. Despite these attempts, the war does not cease to intrude into the lives of Russians.

5.2 "I'll scream at the top of my lungs"

In Ulan-Ude, several volunteers are making stretchers for soldiers on the front line and chatting, as usual, about work, everyday problems, and family. Antonina Petrovna shares her joy: one of her grandchildren has a birthday tomorrow. And suddenly she adds: "I have eight grandchildren, all boys. And four more died at the front, that's how it happened."

In Cheryomushkin, Sverdlovsk Oblast, several female friends gather for dinner at one of their homes. Lyuda is especially talkative today: she readily chats about various topics, but talk about the war, which she habitually justifies, is of no interest to her, "let's not talk about politics," she suggests many times. But when someone starts talking about mobilization and contract service, she joins the conversation. It turns out that her son is thinking about signing a contract. "I'd sooner lay my own life down, you're not going anywhere!" Lyuda shouts, scaring her friends. "I'm shaking all over. I'll scream at the top of my lungs just so they don't take him."

During another evening get-together in Cheryomushkin, women regularly air out the dirty laundry of other city residents, both familiar and unfamiliar to them. No one will go unnoticed or unappreciated! Especially those who spend the money of their soldier husbands on cars and jewelry. Such actions cause special condemnation among those gathered: how can money be worth more than a human being? "I'll buy those earrings myself," Alyona says defiantly, "I'll buy

myself those earrings, and I'll have my man beside me…I would never in my life send my man off to certain death!" she says with certainty.

On a warm autumn day that feels like summer, freelancer Dmitry strolls through a Krasnodar park and tells his interlocutor that the war has not affected the city. "They don't bomb us, and Wagner hasn't come knocking." But suddenly he lowers his voice and admits that because of the war, his future is shrouded in fog and that's why "I've become nervous, let's say."

During our field work in the Russian regions, the war, which was outwardly almost unnoticeable, constantly dropped reminders of itself in the most unexpected ways, as if resisting the normalization discussed in the section above.

Thus, war directly affects people's emotional state. Many of our interlocutors admit that they experience anxiety, tension, uncertainty, fear, even if these things are not usually spoken about openly. The departure of sons and husbands to war makes women "scream at the top of their lungs." However, people rarely share such emotions with others, and if they do, they do so in close friend groups. Therefore, such emotions rarely reach the public sphere.

Although the death of loved ones at the front is most often mourned within narrow groups (families, groups of friends), in some cases it still turns out to be a shock to the entire community, especially in small towns (remember the death of a school teacher in Cheryomushkin). Moreover, beginning to worry about the fate of their loved ones, some Russians gradually extend the concept of "their own kin" to classmates or work colleagues, residents of the same city or village, or residents of the same region. All this means that in some cases, personal grief can become collective grief, causing strong collective emotions. The movement of wives of mobilized soldiers and their ability to unite and share grief is a good example of this.

War-justifying Russians do not want to talk about the war, do not think of it as criminal, and defend Russia's actions if anyone questions them. At the same time, in informal conversations with each other, they discuss the impact of the war on their lives, mostly in a negative way. They are especially indignant when criticizing the war from a moral point of view, claiming, for example, that "life is more valuable than money" or that wars destroy families, meaning both the families of their compatriots and those of residents of Ukraine. Sometimes such criticism even makes them doubt the sense of the actions of the Russian government ("What is this war for?").

The war exponentially increases the uncertainty of the future in the eyes of Russians. It is significant that both confident war opponents, apolitical Russians who justify war without a clear position, and even confident supporters of the war speak about the increased feeling of uncertainty. This feeling of uncertainty is what truly unites Russians today. Despite the fact that people develop different strategies to cope with this feeling, it still significantly complicates the ability to plan their lives and plunges Russians (especially, of course, opponents of war, but not only them) into despondency. At the same time, the state and, most importantly, Putin, who used to be a bastion of certainty ("Putin knows what he is doing"), increasingly seem to our interlocutors to be sources of chaos and uncertainty into their lives.

Finally, despite the fact that even confident opponents of the invasion are gradually integrating into the new reality and trying to live a normal life without thinking about the war every second, this process is slow for them, sometimes through their own resistance. War opponents try not to forget that war is a crime and barbarity: this is how they talk about the "special operation" both in

interviews and in informal conversations with researchers. Solidarity with compatriots who justify the war does not prevent them from maintaining this inner conviction. Moreover, some convinced opponents of the war, like some confident supporters, try to overcome the feeling of discomfort from consuming political news and follow the agenda, despite the fact that it is impossible for them to influence it.

5.3 What does all this mean?

Thus, Russian wartime society can hardly be called a mobilized and ideological society with militaristic features. The desire of Russians to live a normal life outside of politics (and, accordingly, outside of ideological support for the war) only becomes stronger with time. At the same time, the idea of Russian society as cynical and apathetic is also incorrect: the war makes the future of most Russians uncertain, making people experience strong (mostly negative) emotions and criticize what is happening from a moral point of view. For opponents of the invasion, the war itself is a moral crime, while for apolitical Russians, the war destroys the ”moral foundations” of society—the integrity of the family or the value of human life. However, since, with rare exceptions, Russians are left to face their experiences alone, in trying to cope with them they push them to the periphery, and these experiences often remain unnoticed by outside observers.

Contrary to the popular stereotype about the brainwashing of the majority of Russians by the pro-government media, many of them do not truly appropriate the Kremlin's main explanations for the war, continue to fail to understand the goals of the “special operation” and resist (albeit unconsciously) the authorities' attempts to indoctrinate society. Nevertheless, apolitical Russians continue to justify the war (if such a question is put to them in principle), and some of its convinced opponents stop fighting and accept the new reality as it is. At the same time, the deeper we penetrate into various informal communities and friendly environments, the more we notice that the war has shaken the lives of many, forcing them to live in a state of uncertainty and tension. Therefore, even Russians who generally justify the war are increasingly criticizing the so-called “special operation,” it is just that this criticism does not turn them into opponents of the war, almost does not become political, and most importantly, it still remains private, not public.

The war is becoming a normal part of life, and at the same time is resisting habituation: we are dealing with two *opposing* trends that can at the same time *reinforce* each other. This means that the ever-evolving negative consequences of war are forcing some Russians to push it even harder to the periphery of their everyday lives. The future is becoming increasingly uncertain—people are changing their planning strategies; new acquaintances are dying at the front—people are learning to accept it; more drones are falling closer and closer—people are convincing themselves that this is happening everywhere. At the same time, thanks to this repression, Russians are resisting the Kremlin's efforts to make society believe in the nobility and sense of the invasion of Ukraine. Fewer and fewer Russians seem to understand why the war is necessary and for what purpose it is being fought.

The Russia Program

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

The Russia Program at GW is a George Washington University-based analytical center which innovates in digital methods for Russian studies, facilitates research and data-driven decision making and unites Russia experts from all over the world.