

STORIES AT THE WELL BLOG 30.10.2023

# Why study Russian society? And why now?



Patriotic event next to the World War Memorial. Picture: Tatiana Romashko's personal archive.

## Text: Tatiana Romashko

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## TAGS

FASCISM, RESEARCH, RUSSIA

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In order to gain understanding of what is happening inside an ever more totalitarian Russia, it is important not only to continue studying Russian society, but also to develop new approaches and research tools for achieving a critical understanding of its situation, writes researcher Tatiana Romashko.

In late September, I participated in the conference titled “Russia’s War in Ukraine and the Changing European Security Environment” held in Riga, Latvia. The conference organisers invited me, along with fellow panellists Sergey Akopov and Margarita Zavadskaya, to discuss current trends in Russian society. The focus of our panel was to analyse developments in Russia against the backdrop of the ongoing war. We reflected on the feasibility of understanding Russian societal dynamics from abroad and considered innovative methods for deciphering the ever-evolving landscape.

The audience, predominantly comprised of foreign diplomats and officials from the Baltic states, expressed their unease regarding the level of public support for the war in Russia and the potential for protests against the existing regime. A poignant question emerged from the audience: “Why should we study Russia? I want Ukraine to triumph in this war, so why should we concern ourselves with Russia’s internal affairs?”

*Personally, I believe that questions like “why study Russia?”, asked by outsiders, or “why study poststructuralism?”, asked by my former department head, are both subtle attempts to dehumanise the “other” and to distance oneself from pressing issues.*

This essay seeks to answer that essential question: Why study Russia, and why now, especially when the fate of the Ukrainian people hangs in the balance? Before delving into this inquiry, it is imperative to acknowledge my personal background as an academic who hails from St Petersburg, Russia. I left my homeland in 2017, a decision driven in part by an invitation to teach in the international master’s programme at the University of Jyväskylä. The other motivation was the increasing institutional and societal pressure arising from my “exceptionally critical” stance on the changing political landscape within the walls of Herzen State Pedagogical University, where I was a senior lecturer and PhD student between 2010 and 2017.



Patriotic flash mob at children's hospice. Picture: Tatiana Romashko's personal archive.

My unconventional perspective on cultural policy development in post-2012 Russia, rooted in post-structuralist discourse theory, was met with resistance in my department, mainly due to its Western origins. In the years following my arrival in Finland, I have continuously conducted research on Russian politics, culture and society. This has been possible mainly thanks to the professional support of my colleagues at the University of Jyväskylä and the financial support of the Kone Foundation. Personally, I believe that questions like “why study Russia?”, asked by outsiders, or “why study poststructuralism?”, asked by my former department head, are both subtle attempts to dehumanise the “other” and to distance oneself from pressing issues.

But let's get back to the main concern of this essay – why and how we should study Russia anew in the context of the war of aggression against Ukraine. In my recent research paper<sup>1</sup>, I delved into the discussion of whether Russia is fascist and how scholarly efforts can go beyond such labels to gain insight into the actual dynamics of state-society relations. In this vein, I invited the reader to ponder over the novel set of analytical instruments associated with the visual biopolitics approach. My argument was that this perspective allows us to problematise the hegemonic regime of normality in Russia and to identify new forms of political opposition. In what follows, I will try to illustrate my point with an example.

*Interpreting public opinion polls, which consistently show 70-80% public support for the Russian authorities, including figures such as Vladimir Putin or Sergei Lavrov, and their goals in Ukraine, is a daunting task.*

Contemporary Russia remains a perplexing enigma to the international community. Conducting research on Russia and deciphering public opinion on the war against Ukraine presents several challenges. The first obstacle is the lack of relevant and credible data on the subject.

Collecting and analysing data is fraught with difficulties. On the one hand, European universities and public foundations do not readily support fieldwork or research visits to Russia. On the other hand, we cannot fully rely on data collected by state or independent research institutions in Russia, such as VCIOM or the Levada Centre. Interpreting public opinion polls, which consistently show 70-80% public support for the Russian authorities<sup>2</sup>, including figures such as Vladimir Putin or Sergei Lavrov, and their goals in Ukraine, is a daunting task.

While these figures may seem disturbing, it remains unclear why Russians give such answers in telephone interviews. Some observers attribute it to a “silent majority” or conformist support for the repressive government. Jeremy Morris, calls this phenomenon “defensive consolidation”, a strategy of self-censorship adopted by many Russians. People simply aim to guess the “correct” answers on the questionnaire, attempting to avoid problems and get on with their daily lives. Political analysts Margarita Zavadskaya and Aleksey Gilev explain this by the passive and apolitical nature of Russian society, which shows support for the authorities in response to increasing administrative and economic coercion.

In order to peel back the cloak of authoritarianism and gain a critical understanding of what is happening inside the aggressor, it is imperative not only to persist in studying Russia, but also to develop new approaches and research tools. Innovative methodologies are essential for studying the social dynamics within hybrid regimes that are steadily moving towards authoritarianism. We need to understand the role assigned to society and how it is integrated into a totalitarian state mechanism. To counter growing conservative tendencies around the world, it is essential to identify when, why, and how the masses in Russia are transforming into the symbolic markers of fascist rule.

An abundance of Russian media propaganda continuously conveys multiple indications of public support for the “special military operation” in Ukraine. In the spring of 2022, for example, Z-flashmobs and Z-patriotic events spread across Russia. Schoolchildren, soldiers, pensioners, factory workers and even disabled people lined up in Z-shapes adorned with the Russian tricolour or the black and orange pattern associated with the military symbol of the Georgian ribbon (*Georgiyevskaya lentochka*). This collective assemblage of human bodies in public spaces does indeed give the impression of nationwide support for the war, a perception reinforced by the consistent 76% support in social polls.



Figure 1. Patriotic education in a random day care centre. Picture: Tatiana Romashko's personal archive.

However, if we look at this phenomenon through the visual lens of biopolitics, we will be able to see beneath the surface of the massive manifestations of pro-war sentiment. Informed by Foucauldian theoretical frameworks, this perspective allows us to examine the power mechanisms at play in the governance of the collective body of the nation. By exploring the visual side of behavioural conformity in Russian society, we can identify structural aspects of human administration associated with life cycles of rest and productivity, institutional normalisation, and the regularity of location, appearance, and form of expression. If we look closely at each image from the vast archive of the 2022 Z-Flash mob, retrieved from the Yandex search, we see the faces of small children indifferently or anxiously holding tricolour pieces of paper (Fig. 1). Other display architectural landmarks in Russia's far-flung regions (fig. 2), conveying their alignment with the central authorities. All the images highlight the monotony and standardisation of expression – people lined up in a Z or V shape (fig. 3), willingly waiting for a drone photo shoot to end so they can return to their daily routines.



Figure 2. Patriotic event "You won't be able to cancel us" by students from the city of Kostroma. Picture: Tatiana Romashko's personal archive.



Figure 3. Patriotic action next to the Kanashsky College of Transport and Energy. Picture: Tatiana Romashko's personal archive.

These visual markers reveal the nature of Russia's "mass" support for the war against Ukraine. In essence, people are being instructed by their organisations to join the national flash mob and show their support for the Russian army and government. This raises the question of whether schoolchildren can refuse the patriotic instructions of their teachers. It also raises the question of whether public sector workers have autonomy from the administration to express political pluralism or a critical stance towards the central government. Adults may be able to make political choices, but this may come at the cost of ostracism or economic hardship. In any society, only a minority are prepared to deviate from the norm and the accepted views of the majority. In other words, it is not so easy to take an exceptional and political stance and possibly suffer and become an outcast among one's own people. Political opposition in Russia today is anything but easy. It is obvious that there is considerable support for the Kremlin leadership in Russia, but a closer look reveals that this support is significantly influenced by societal pressures and the potential for negative repercussions if individuals express dissenting opinions.

Therefore, I believe that ethical considerations should underpin the analysis of the extensive visual evidence depicting massive support for the war against Ukraine. Additionally, it is vital to continually pose new research questions regarding the state of Russian society and the conditions under which it can either unite around the flag or oppose the oppressive state. We need to go beyond one-dimensional assessments of the situation and acknowledge the diversity of opinions within Russian society. In this case, visual research methods allow for remote data collection without intruding or endangering potentially vulnerable groups. The biopolitical perspective, in turn, helps to dissect the national corporeality of the state, revealing multiple fragments of human

bodies striving to pursue the most viable strategies for survival under an authoritarian regime.

As an international researcher based in Finland, I deeply appreciate the support of foundations and other public actors for research on Russian politics, culture and society. Being close to Russia, I believe that it is in the interest of any neighbouring country to remain vigilant about trends and developments next door.

*The images in this essay are from Romashko's personal archive. They were sourced from the top 200 images from Yandex search results for the keywords "for victory 2022" (за победы 2022), and flash mobs with hashtags #ForOurs (#Занашу), #Wedon'tleaveoursbehind (#своихнебросаем), #Victory (#победа), #ForVictory (#ЗаПобеду).*

<sup>1</sup> Romashko, T. (2023) Peace and War in Our Bodies and Minds: Public Subversion vs. Mass Totalization. *Visual Anthropology*. Ahead of Print. DOI: 10.1080/08949468.2023.2210031

<sup>2</sup> Public trust to the Institutions and Authorities. *Levade Centre*, October 10. 2023. [https://www.levada.ru/2023/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-sentyabr-2023/?utm\\_source=mailpoet&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter-post-title\\_81](https://www.levada.ru/2023/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-sentyabr-2023/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81)

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Morris (2022) Russians in Wartime and Defensive Consolidation. *Current History*, 121 (837): 258–263. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2022.121.837.258>

<sup>4</sup> Zavadsкая, Margarita, and Aleksey Gilev. 2022. "Kakoj rezhim v Rossii na samom dele?" [What Is the Real Regime in Russia?] KIT Medusa, June; <https://mailchi.mp/getkit.news/total>

<sup>5</sup> More on fascism in Putin's Russia see: "Is Putin's regime already fascist?" *Russia.Post*, May 17, 2022 [https://russiapost.info/politics/is\\_putins\\_regime\\_already\\_fascist](https://russiapost.info/politics/is_putins_regime_already_fascist) and Budraitskis, I. 2022. "From Managed Democracy to Fascism: Putin's Imposition of Obedience and Order on Russian Society." *Tempest*, April 23, <https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/04/from-managed-democracy-to-fascism/>

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, edited by Michel Senellart and trans. by Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>7</sup> The top 200 images from Yandex search results for on key words (for victory 2022), for the hashtags #Wedon'tleaveoursbehind, #Victory, #ForVictory. Yandex (<https://yandex.com>) is the largest search engine in Russia and a state-sanctioned alternative to Google.