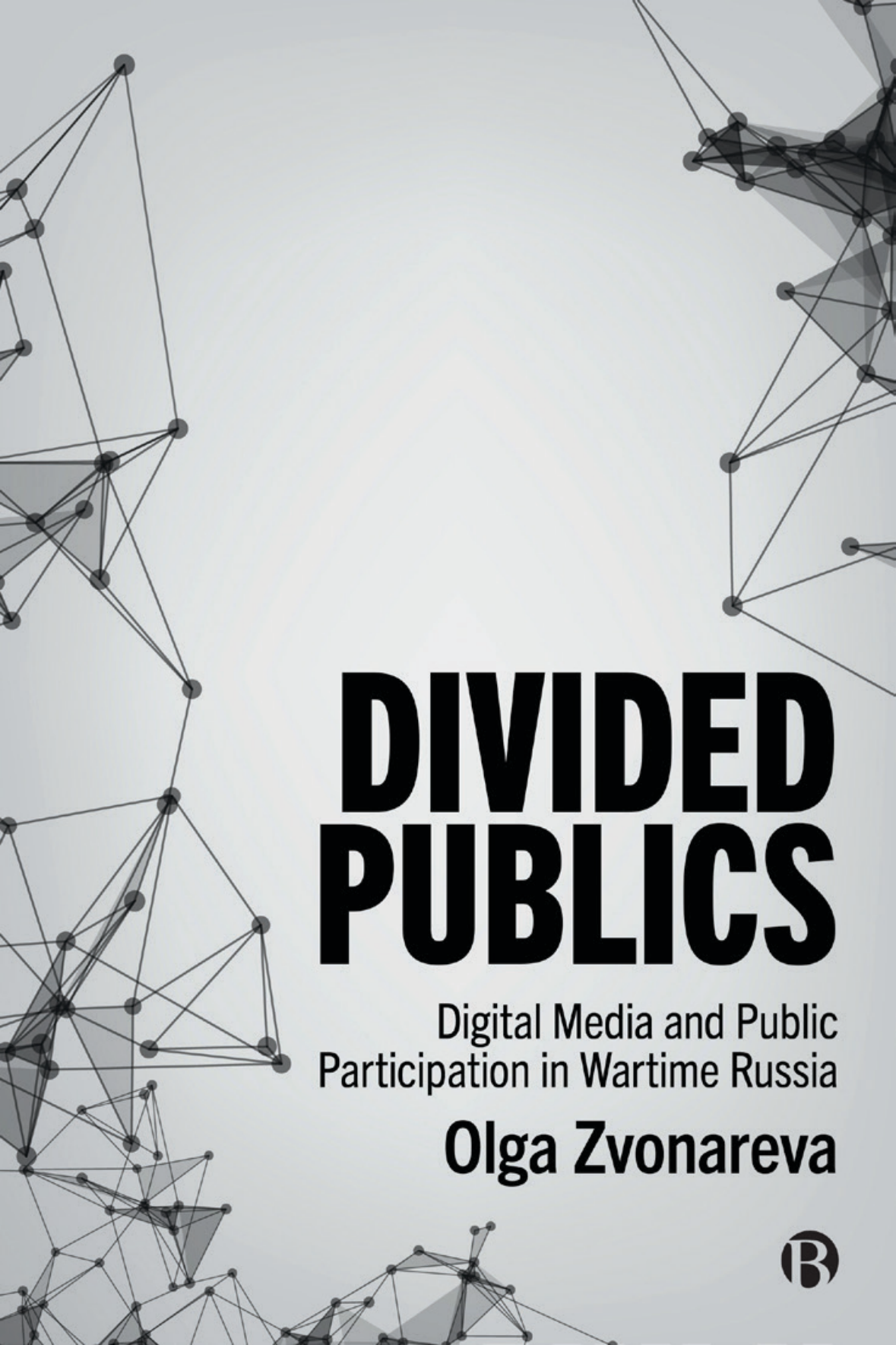




DIVIDED PUBLICS

Digital Media and Public
Participation in Wartime Russia

Olga Zvonareva



DIVIDED PUBLICS

Digital Media and Public
Participation in Wartime Russia

Olga Zvonareva



BRISTOL
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2026 by

Bristol University Press
University of Bristol
1–9 Old Park Hill
Bristol
BS2 8BB
UK
t: +44 (0)117 374 6645
e: bup-info@bristol.ac.uk

Details of international sales and distribution partners are available at bristoluniversitypress.co.uk

© Olga Zvonareva 2026

The digital PDF and ePub versions of this title are available open access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits reproduction and distribution for non-commercial use without further permission provided the original work is attributed.

DOI: [10.51952/9781529255355](https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529255355)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5292-5533-1 paperback

ISBN 978-1-5292-5534-8 ePub

ISBN 978-1-5292-5535-5 OA PDF

The right of Olga Zvonareva to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved: no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission of Bristol University Press.

Every reasonable effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyrighted material. If, however, anyone knows of an oversight, please contact the publisher.

The statements and opinions contained within this publication are solely those of the author and not of the University of Bristol or Bristol University Press. The University of Bristol and Bristol University Press disclaim responsibility for any injury to persons or property resulting from any material published in this publication.

Bristol University Press works to counter discrimination on grounds of gender, race, disability, age and sexuality.

Cover design: Andrew Ward

Front cover image: 123RF/peacestock123

Bristol University Press uses environmentally responsible print partners.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon,
CR0 4YY

Bristol University Press' authorised representative in the European Union is:
Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia,
Email: gpsr.requests@easproject.com



To Nadya and Igor

Contents

About the Author	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
PART I	Politics
Intermezzo 1.1	Politics Beyond the State 15
Intermezzo 1.2	Rethinking Politics 18
Chapter 1	Healthcare: Politics Otherwise 23
PART II	Participation
Intermezzo 2.1	Diversity of Participation 53
Intermezzo 2.2	Digital Technologies and Participation 57
Chapter 2	A New Ecology of Volunteer Initiatives: Participating by Other Means 61
PART III	Publics
Intermezzo 3.1	Searching for Publics 93
Intermezzo 3.2	Publics in the Era of Digitalization 96
Chapter 3	‘Patriotic’ Initiatives and Divided Publics 100
Intermezzo 4	Reflections on National Identities 123
Chapter 4	A World Less Common 128
Appendix: Ethical and Methodological Questions	139
References	162
Index	171

About the Author

Olga Zvonareva is Associate Professor at the Department of Health, Ethics and Society, Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Situated in the field of science and technology studies, her primary research line concerns relations between technologies and politics. She is especially invested in studying instances of participation in situations when members of the public are discouraged from doing so, and is the lead editor of a recent special issue ‘Public Participation Amidst Hostility: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern’ of the *Social Inclusion* journal published in 2025.

Acknowledgements

This book owes its existence to people who entrusted me with their stories and struggles. A time will come when they are able to come forward and speak for themselves about what they saw and did. Until then, this book offers merely a glimpse into a vast current of collective action that flows, largely unseen, beneath the surface.

I am enormously grateful to the colleagues who read and commented on earlier versions of this text: Klasien Horstman (thank you for this and for so much more), Olga Temina, Masha Denisova, Vlas Nikulkin, Marieke Hopman, and Alena Kamenshchikova. I was fortunate to present parts of this work to a variety of audiences, including participants in the workshop ‘Participation and STS Sensibilities’ (Maastricht, 2024) and in the three conference panels, ‘Invisibility and Public Participation: Engaging With Disregarded, Discarded, and Hidden Practices’ (EASST-4S 2024), ‘Alternative path to political participation: addressing matters of concern in social sector in Russia’ (Tartu Conference on East European and Eurasian Studies 2023), and ‘Unseen Participation: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern’ (EASST 2022). I benefited a great deal from comments I received in these settings, particularly from Jan-Peter Voß, Götz Bachmann, Ekaterina Borozdina, Andrea Schikowitz, and Jason Chilvers.

Conducting the research reported here required receiving a variety of approvals and negotiating institutional permissions at a time when Dutch universities prohibited their staff from going anywhere near Russia, physically and otherwise. I would not have been able to persevere in navigating these processes without the support and counsel of Bart Penders, David Shaw, Guido de Wert, Raymond de Vries, Marieke Hopman, and Annelies Moors. I am grateful to Rianne Letschert who took the time to talk to me when no other decision maker would.

For financial support, I thank the European Research Council (ERC). I received funding under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No 948073), which made the research reported here possible and enabled open access publication of this book. Needless to say, everything written here reflects only the author’s

views, and the funder is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information this book contains.

For time to work on this and other projects, my heartfelt thanks to the nursery Villa Luna where my daughter spent many happy hours after turning six months old – much to my relatives' horror.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and encouraging suggestions and to all those working at Bristol University Press for seeing the merit in this book, for their patient assistance and support, and for helping me reach the finish line.

Introduction

On writing this book

It was summer 2024. I had just completed the majority of this book in one go, but I was still pondering over this Introduction. I spent days relating the book to the existing literature, searching for suitable formulations for my main messages, and endlessly rephrasing the large questions that the book raises. But the Introduction still didn't seem to work. Gradually, it dawned on me why I was stuck: I wasn't sure if I should have written this book at all.

The roots of this book run back to spring 2022, in the weeks following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February of that year. I learned then about new volunteer initiatives springing up all over Russia. That was a brief period when information about their existence made its way to social media. Russians who opposed their country's invasion of Ukraine took to social media to post calls to support these initiatives and to share links that would typically lead to the new initiatives' group chats on Telegram. Soon after, social media mentions all but disappeared to keep the volunteers' operation as hidden as possible. Given the increasing fervour with which war censorship laws were being applied, including the prohibition against calling Russia's action in Ukraine 'a war', attracting publicity was not a good idea for these initiatives.

But this brief period of visibility was enough for me to notice what in several more months would become a vast ecology of dispersed grassroots volunteer collectives, all of which emerged post-24 February 2022. Given that often people from Ukrainian territories that are occupied or have become zones of active warfare can only flee in the direction of Russia, the backbone of this ecology is a host of collectives that ferry Ukrainian people across Russia towards the European Union (EU). After crossing the Russian border, the refugees are met by the EU-based organizations, but it is local volunteers in Russia who arrange their transit through the country. This backbone is surrounded by smaller initiatives that coalesced around arranging medical assistance and various other types of support, including for those who for the time being remain in Russia. If I were to sum up in one sentence the sentiment animating the continuous efforts of those involved,

it would be something along the lines of ‘Citizens of the aggressor country, we must do something to ameliorate the suffering inflicted.’

It was not a research interest that originally drove me to these volunteer initiatives. I relocated from Russia to work at a Dutch university more than ten years ago, but I have remained attached to my birth country in many different ways. My identity is inextricably connected to being Russian; this does not seem to be amenable to change. And, like many others, during the first weeks of the invasion I was signing open letters, compulsively scrolling through the news, searching for contentious activities in Russia that I could support, all the while feeling desperate and useless. It is these feelings that are responsible for my learning about the volunteers whose activities subsequently inspired this book.

The research interest arrived later. First, I noticed that volunteer initiatives to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia had become quite massive. By May 2022, they involved thousands of people, the vast majority of whom were not previously aware of one another’s existence and, of course, had never done anything together. Volunteers relied heavily on digital technologies, primarily Telegram, to connect and to organize the horizontally coordinated operation of their extensive networks. I began to wonder how such large-scale collective action could materialize seemingly out of thin air, and about the role that Telegram played in making it possible. So, I adopted a more systematic approach to following several different initiatives by observing their work in open and closed Telegram chats, and by talking to the volunteers themselves.

Then, with gaining more insight into how these newly emerged collectives functioned, I began to wonder if they were not in fact forming the most extensive, organized, and resilient resistance network I could see in Russia at that time. I leaned towards thinking of their activities as resistance not only because they are carried out in an attempt to act contrary to the dominant order, but also because they linked together a mass of previously unconnected individuals into a dispersed but stable and clearly contentious grouping. So, I began sketching the conceptual lines along which to think about this resistance, which has been working without attracting attention through silent but incessant doing.

Finally, some thousand pages of notes and interview transcripts later, in an effort to map the ecology of the newly emerged volunteer initiatives, I could no longer avoid looking into something that to me stuck out as a sore thumb amid the initiatives I had engaged with so far. It turned out that some of the grassroots groups that had emerged in wartime Russia and that adopted a similar dedication to assisting people from Ukraine did not in any way intend to resist the war-waging authoritarian state with their assistance activities. Rather, through these activities these groups aspired to extend the reach of the very same state. The two kinds of volunteer collectives did not cooperate, nor would they engage in public discussion or stage

open contestations. This deep schism made me wonder whether all of the volunteer collectives, together, could be considered a newly emergent and fundamentally divided public, one that is actively participating in politics not so much by talking but rather by digitally mediated doing. If this is the case, then it raises some important questions: how to articulate this kind of public participation and its significance? And how do profound divisions involved relate to the digital technologies that are so central to the volunteers' activities? With this in mind, I began using the data to think with theories of participation and publics in the digital age.

The results nearly wrote themselves. By carefully following the morphing of scattered individuals into networked, efficient, and stably functioning bottom-up initiatives, I was able to construct a window on the roots and forms of collective action amid crisis in the digital age. By engaging with different kinds of volunteer initiatives, the manuscript told a story about the intense interplay of solidarity and divisiveness as it unfolds along with the digitally mediated efforts of wartime volunteers in Russia. Ultimately, this story shows how digital media are simultaneously supportive and corrosive of democracy, freedom, and societal cohesion.

I shared early drafts of this text, written in Russian, with those who had spoken to me (I spoke only to the volunteers who pursue resistance; activities of their less covert opposites I traced via social media). The text apparently circulated among the volunteer community and led to more volunteers contacting me to tell their stories. For their own safety and the safety of those they assist, contentious volunteer collectives strive to limit the amount of external reminders of their operation. That for the majority of the rest of the world they do not exist serves a protective function, but it also leaves them unseen along with the alternative version of Russia that is brought to the brink of reality through their activities. I suppose that it was the felt need to attest to their existence and to their dissent that motivated the volunteers to talk to me and to contribute to making this book. In a way, the subsequently written English-language text that absorbed the volunteers' stories and gave more space to theorizing public participation and the divided publics is a testament to the existence of that resistance, albeit this book still describes it in a fully anonymized way for safety purposes. Partly, this testament is addressed to the contentious volunteers themselves: you are there, and your collective action is recognized.

Once I had completed all this work, and was trying to find the right way to introduce the topic to readers, I found myself unable to stop obsessively scrutinizing my own position in the research reported here, the topic I ended up choosing, and the shaping of the results. In contemporary qualitative social sciences, there is little expectation of researchers engaging with their fields of study from a position of absolute neutrality and detachment. Researchers do have interests, commitments,

and backgrounds, and it is commonly acknowledged that all of these inevitably make their way into the research process. It is pointless to address this inevitability by trying to assume a position that would allow one a 'view from nowhere' on a research situation, because such a position does not exist. Rather, qualitative social science researchers tend to emphasize explicit reflection on how they themselves feature in their research and being transparent about it. Nonetheless, I could see that my attachments to my field of study go beyond what can, perhaps, be considered the usual situated engagement between viewpoints in social scientific knowledge production. Not only do I empathize with some of my research participants and not with others, but I also share the despair and feelings of guilt of the former, being in this sense one of them. Furthermore, my work is an equally suitable target for the criticisms aimed at the volunteers whose activities I view as a form of resistance. By this, I mean the criticism that those who wish to resist the war can do so only by directly attempting to stop the war; everything else is akin to watching a house be set alight and then, rather than dousing the flames, assisting with removing the contents of the house while the fire rages on. This is a common trope in online discussions that I see periodically erupting on Facebook among those aware of the volunteer activities. It has forced me time and again to return to my conclusions and wonder if they are anything more than projections of my own hope for a more peaceful future.

Still, starting yet another version of this Introduction, the version you are reading now, from articulating my close and personal relationship with the research presented in this book, helped me to (mostly) stop agonizing over whether, being who I am, I should or should not have written it. Unable to change being anything but an impartial and uninvolved observer I have taken painstaking care to be transparent in my analysis and my thinking process throughout. I would even go as far as to suggest that while this process has been moved by my own hopes and concerns, this did not dampen it. Quite the opposite. I have been able, with continuous reflexivity, to capitalize on the cognitive role of my own emotions while making fieldwork decisions, and in making sense of the complexity I encountered. I hope that due to my commitment to transparency and reflexivity, this final version of the book became sufficiently open to invite the 'plugging in' of other ways and styles of thinking for continued reflection on participation and digital media amid a variety of contemporary crises. For those who are interested in the details of how the research this book is based on was done, I included an appendix on this topic, which contains a more extensive reflection on my approach to positionality in this research, an overview of the data and how they were analysed, and a discussion of ethical questions and choices I made.

One last note about the writing of this book is in order. I use the phrase 'people from Ukraine in Russia' to refer to those people whom the volunteer

initiatives described in this book are mostly attempting to assist. People from Ukraine who found themselves in Russia after 24 February 2022 were forced to move by the intensification of Russian aggression against their country. Some were fleeing the war, others were deported, and yet others were abducted. The phrase ‘people from Ukraine in Russia’ is meant to recognize a diversity of direct and indirect ways to brutally force people to leave their homes. This term does not refer to those who remain in the occupied territories.

On reading this book

The structure of this book is meant to ease what I referred to earlier as ‘plugging in’ – joining in the argument I build herein and carrying it away in the directions that readers see fit. I have split my argument into two relatively free-standing lines which together tell the story of the digitally aided emergence of the deeply divided wartime public and its participation in what amounts to assembling incompatible versions of the world. The two lines can be read together, or separately as stand-alone arguments.

The first line engages with theory. It is formed by seven short texts that I call *intermezzi*, which mainly elaborate on the concepts of politics, participation, and publics suitable for times of crisis in the digital age. The second line, interspersed with the *intermezzi*, is formed by chapters that narrate the empirical details of how new volunteer initiatives in Russia have come to life, how they operate, and how they relate to one another in the larger ecology they have formed. The *intermezzi* delineate a conceptual repertoire, which directed my analysis of volunteer initiatives and of the political significance of their work as presented in the chapters. As such, the *intermezzi* serve as theoretical ‘stepping stones’ into the subsequent empirical chapters. The rest of this section provides an outline of the overall story of this book as it is told in the *intermezzi* and chapters. Those who would rather piece the story together by themselves can skip the following summary.

The first two *intermezzi* (1.1 and 1.2) deal with the question of how to understand politics. *Intermezzo* 1.1 elaborates on the necessity to look for politics beyond the state, contrary to the long-established intellectual tradition of assuming a state monopoly on politics. *Intermezzo* 1.2 discusses ways to think of politics beyond the state, in terms of specific sites, actor groups, and types of activity, and instead of these ways suggests thinking of politics in terms of specific situations. It proposes to consider political such situations that emerge around issues of collective concern, be it the installation of 5G masts or a war. Situations of this kind entangle antagonistic interests and correspondingly diverse threats to livelihoods, while laying bare shared dependencies and simultaneous societal divisions. Following these two *intermezzi*, [Chapter 1](#) focuses on the emergence and functioning of one

specific volunteer initiative in wartime Russia, which has come to specialize in arranging medical assistance. This chapter traces how the initial digitally mediated and contingent connections between individuals were established, and how these later stabilized into a Telegram-based group initiative, giving detailed insight into how flexible, efficiently organized collective action materializes in a matter of several weeks. [Chapter 1](#) proposes to conceive of this action as participation *in politics*, given that the collective – comprising healthcare managers, physicians, digital technologies, and dissent – is implicated in a political situation around the issue of war.

The next couple of intermezzi (2.1 and 2.2) focus on conceptions of participation. Intermezzo 2.1 suggests the importance of decentring the state not only in conceiving politics but also in conceiving participation, which allows the recognition of the diversity of continuously reshuffling and widely distributed participatory practices. It proposes to study participation by concentrating on specific political situations in order to take stock of issue-specific ecologies of participation, including those participation practices that depart from more familiar formats, or are even unique to the issue in question. Intermezzo 2.2 follows up by exploring the implications of digitalization for participation, and highlights the enhanced connectivity that allows the rapid emergence and flexible coordination of action networks. Further, [Chapter 2](#) examines the diversity of new contentious volunteer collectives in Russia, showing how they settle into ways of operation that strike a different balance between being systematic and being responsive, between maintaining orderliness and maintaining spontaneity, and between going public and remaining hidden. It brings to the fore the role of digital media, demonstrating that digitally mediated connectivity, instantaneity, and flexible, partly hidden organization, define how grassroots attempts to assist people from Ukraine in Russia function overall. [Chapter 2](#) proposes that these same characteristics describe how some members of the public in Russia, being concerned with their implication in starting a war, still attempt to act on this concern despite being explicitly discouraged from doing so. That is, the chapter proposes that, in the given situation, volunteering becomes a means of *participating*.

The two subsequent intermezzi (3.1 and 3.2) reflect on the conception of publics. Intermezzo 3.1 departs from conceptions of publics as being always already there, and continuously available to be consulted through means such as opinion polls or deliberation sessions. Instead, it stresses how publics can be understood as coming into existence through a process of becoming concerned with, articulating, and addressing a particular issue. Publics thus understood are not uniform; rather, they are divided by the divergent commitments and interests caught up in the issue that they emerged together with. Intermezzo 3.2 elaborates on how digitalization relates to this understanding of publics. It suggests that the emergence of digital

technologies has not necessarily changed the nature of publics. The reason for this is that the capacity to act as publics is not possessed by individual humans. Rather this capacity is distributed throughout sociomaterial collectives comprising interrelated humans and nonhumans, such as devices, procedures, documents, settings and, more recently, digital technologies. Following these intermezzi, [Chapter 3](#) zooms in on two wartime volunteer initiatives, which assist people from Ukraine in Russia not in pursuit of resistance to the war-waging state but as a contribution to a common cause of reuniting the people somehow meant to be one, thus supporting the very same state and the war. Viewing these initiatives as acting in the same ecology of participation as the initiatives described in the previous chapters allows for the argument that all of them together are the *public* that formed around the issue of the war, laying bare the rift that makes this public irreconcilably divided. Members of this public attempt to gravitate as far from each other as possible, but remain tied together by their ‘Russianness’, which makes them jointly and antagonistically implicated in the issue of war.

The last intermezzo (4) picks up this notion of ‘Russianness’ as something that compels the newly emerged public to act on the issue of war, and elaborates ways of thinking about nations and national identities. It emphasizes that shared imaginaries of nationhood are not a given; the coherence of such imaginaries, and their ability to inspire a firm sense of belonging, are the outcome of persistent cultivation and the rehearsal of ideas about a nation and its future in multiple milieus and through diverse means that are both discursive and material.

Finally, [Chapter 4](#) brings the theory- and data-focused lines of the overall story told in this book together. The chapter elaborates on the different ways in which digital technologies are conducive to both togetherness and divisiveness, produced through practices of public participation. For one, digitally coordinated assistance practices of wartime volunteer initiatives in Russia configure two incompatible versions of Russian national identity. Crucially these are digital media that allow the possibility of numerous collective actors to participate in imagining the nation and its future, making the means of constructing national identities much more widely distributed and accessible than in the past age of mass media. On the one hand, this possibility is concerning as it presents yet another source of fragmentation in contemporary societies. On the other hand, it also grants a chance for alternative national identities, capable of a strong grip on collective imagination to emerge, which, in a situation like that of today’s Russia, may hold the promise of positive change.

Furthermore, by acting as a public on the issue of their concern, the wartime volunteer initiatives have been assembling alternative, incompatible versions of the world through the persistent performance of their activities at scale over the course of more than four years to date. These alternatives are

not mere rhetorical constructions; they are tangible, grounded in expansive volunteer networks and their incessant collective doing. It is through this largely similar doing that some volunteers claim their responsibility as Russian citizens to attempt to address the suffering being inflicted by their country, while others claim their responsibility to support the war to unify the Russian and Ukrainian peoples. By bringing to life their alternative versions of the world, and pulling them as far apart as possible, members of this newly emerged public become irreconcilably divided by their incompatible aspirations. Again, the fact that a joint implication in an issue of collective concern does not produce engagement between conflicting viewpoints might be concerning, in general. However, where drastic power differentials criss-cross a public and the ecology of its participatory activities, the absence of open political engagement might enable less powerful alternatives to mature sufficiently for engagement to become a possibility in the future.

Against this backdrop, the ambivalence of digital media comes powerfully to the fore. These media are evidently neither inherently supportive nor undermining of democracy and freedom; the use of digital media by volunteer networks, as described in this book, shows that digital media have the potential both to facilitate societal cohesion and to drive societal divisions. This ambivalence, though, should not be taken to mean that digital media are simply tools for users to freely employ as they see fit. Digital media themselves do matter but how exactly they facilitate and constrain certain modes of action is always configured (and reconfigured) in situated interactions between digital technologies and users. In this regard, it is not exactly an accident that it is specifically Telegram – among all the kinds of digital media – that has become centrally involved in the work of the volunteer collectives. Telegram is particularly open for users to tinker with, and it explicitly limits its control over how users deal with it, making interactions between this technology and its users highly adaptable and flexible. [Chapter 4](#) ends by suggesting that it is this flexibility, and the corresponding responsiveness in Telegram’s relations with its users, that made this technology useful for the volunteers, and positioned it as an actor involved both in mounting resistance to the authoritarian state and in extending the aggressive expansionist politics of the very same state.

Understanding digital media

Now, before ending this Introduction and moving on to the main body of this book, is a good moment to pause and briefly consider how we might understand digital media as a set of technologies central to the participatory collectives with which this book is concerned. Popular and scholarly discussions of digital media and society focus largely on social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), but also such as

Telegram and Parler (Tucker et al, 2018; Lorenz-Spreen et al, 2022). Claims made about the effects of these platforms on societal dynamics range from presenting social media as opportunities to reinvigorate the public sphere and making otherwise marginalized voices heard, to issuing dire warnings about the divisive tendencies of social media to create ‘echo chambers’ that prevent engagement between conflicting interests and worldviews (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015; Sunstein, 2018; Persily and Tucker, 2020; Jeppesen et al, 2022). Importantly, many of these claims, however divergent, appear to have something in common: they assume, more or less explicitly, the stability and immanence of the platforms’ properties that, in turn, matter for what is done and how on social media. That is, the authors of these claims adopt what can be called a platform-centric approach.

One concept extensively used in social media studies to make sense of platforms and their effects is that of ‘affordances’ (Davis and Chouinard, 2016; Ronzhyn et al, 2023). By tracing how the concept of affordances has been employed in scholarship, we can notice the analytical reliance on the platform-centric understandings of social media and also attempts to tilt these understandings towards a more practice-centric approach.

The concept of affordances has its roots in ecological psychology, where it was originally succinctly defined by James Gibson as ‘what things furnish, for good or ill’ (Gibson, 1966, p 285). It was later taken up in the field of design and human–computer interaction, to refer to ‘the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. A chair affords (“is for”) support and, therefore, affords sitting. A chair can also be carried’ (Norman, 1988, p 9). Both these foundational formulations have at their core the idea that affordances are properties of things, and that these properties exist irrespectively of whether they are noticed or made use of. Concerned with effective design decisions, Donald Norman, the author of the second definition, emphasized the central role of designers in making the capabilities of technological systems clear to users through effective interface design. Well-designed interfaces allow alignment between what Norman called ‘perceived’ and ‘real’ affordances, whereas badly designed interfaces conceal real affordances, which, consequently, cannot be perceived and must be learned instead.

In social media studies this concept has often been employed in a way that similarly positions affordances as relatively stable and inherent features produced by social media platforms themselves. For example, boyd (2011) has famously argued that networked technologies of social media have introduced four new affordances: persistence; replicability; scalability; and searchability (boyd, 2011). These terms, respectively, refer to that expressions made online are automatically recorded; social media content can be duplicated with ease; this content has the potential to enjoy wide distribution and immense

visibility; and this content can be accessed through search. [boyd \(2011, p 39\)](#) went on to argue that: '[w]hile such affordances do not determine social practice, they can destabilize core assumptions people make when engaging in social life. As such, they can reshape publics both directly and through the practices that people develop to account for the affordances. When left unchecked, networked technologies can play a powerful role in controlling information and configuring interactions'. This elaboration alerts us to the power that social media platforms exercise over societal life, but in doing so it also emphasizes a platform-centric understanding of affordances as something that belongs to platforms themselves. Similar accounts that identify other affordances of media platforms, for example the affordance of shareability understood as design features that invite people to share content ([Steinert and Dennis, 2022](#)), have followed and become a rather popular genre ([Karahanna et al, 2018](#)). Some social media scholars have challenged such applications of the affordance concept ([Davis and Chouinard, 2016](#); [Evans et al, 2017](#); [Ronzhyn et al, 2023](#)). Perhaps most importantly, they invited more attention to the *relationality* of affordances. One illustrative example is the ethnographic study by Elisabetta Costa of Facebook use in a Turkish town ([Costa, 2018](#)). Costa demonstrated how users actively appropriated the platform to fit their own ideas and habits: users had multiple Facebook accounts, often under pseudonyms, for communicating with different groups of people; they tended to create multiple closed groups and extensively used private chat for one-to-one communication; they barely shared friends' posts and images, and they frequently opened and closed accounts following life events such as a quarrel with a friend or a change of partner. The affordances of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability – widely accepted in the scholarship as universal properties of social media – account only partially for these uses, which are, coincidentally, quite different from the pattern of use assumed to be typical in much of the literature: having only one Facebook account that is used mostly under a real name and is public by default.

What to do then with the apparent mismatch between theoretical expectations and real-life practices? Rethinking affordances in relational terms could provide a way out, as Costa suggested. Taking relationality into account would mean that, rather than being immanent properties of the platforms themselves, affordances are being produced in interactions between platforms and users in specific situations. As [Costa \(2018, p 3651\)](#) argued: 'the properties that shape, constrain, or generate practices cannot be known outside their actual situated uses. I can describe only actualized and enacted affordances. Affordances are never specific to a platform only, but are always specific to the relation between the platform and the situated users'. Social media usage is not, therefore, predetermined outside everyday practices of engagement with the platforms in specific environments. One implication

of such a relational approach is that we lose the opportunity to talk about affordances in universalistic terms as immutable properties of platforms manifest always and everywhere. In fact, ethnography of Facebook uses by inhabitants of a Turkish town points to the possibility that affordances presented in many social media studies as stable properties of a platform actually characterize situated patterns of usage in the Anglo-American contexts that have received most scholarly attention to date.

In light of these critical works, the idea of affordances loses its platform-centric character. Instead, affordances become something that is co-produced together by a platform architecture and practices of use within specific situations, thus alerting us to the multiplicity of implications of social media for society. Indeed, when the properties of social media are not considered as belonging to a platform, but rather as being configured through situated interactions between platforms and users, then we are better equipped to account for the wide variety of effects brought about by social media use. For instance, we can notice that social media can very well be neither strictly divisive nor connective, but instead ambivalent, being both at once. In this sense, the story told in this book is about the context-specific, everyday practices of using Telegram by volunteer groups in Russia, the mutual configuration of the app and its users, and the specific affordances that emerge in the process.

I must note, before proceeding further, that in Russia, the ambivalence of social media is made particularly stark by the state actors' usage of social media and digital technologies more broadly in efforts to enhance surveillance, censorship, and repression. Such efforts have been termed 'digital authoritarianism' in scholarship (Morgus, 2019). In the past, Russian state actors tended to focus on flooding online spaces with news and stories that supported government-endorsed narratives (Terzyan, 2023). After the intensification of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, their approach has become increasingly restrictive and controlling, gaining momentum with tightening censorship legislation (Lokot, 2023). Of particular significance here are the two laws enacted on 4 March 2022, criminalizing independent war reporting, with penalties of up to 15 years in prison. These laws made it illegal to spread 'fake news' (that is, information at odds with state propaganda) about the Russian army and government, to call to end the army deployment, and to support sanctions against Russian targets. They helped streamline and scale prosecution of individuals for online activities such as posting or resharing or even liking anti-war content. In these conditions, the cost of expressing dissent have risen significantly. A report from February 2025 indicates that during the three years of war, 1,185 people faced criminal prosecution for anti-war stance, and the majority of these cases (688) were initiated for statements made on social media (vs for instance, 21 cases of criminal prosecution for public protest) (OVD-Info, 2025).

Furthermore, online surveillance increased, especially after mobilization prompted men of recruitment age to attempt to leave Russia to avoid being drafted. The state actively employed online tracking tools, including the tracking of social media accounts, to prevent them from leaving (Mahon and Walker, 2024). Meanwhile, wartime interference with social media included blocking Facebook and Instagram and restricting TikTok, which has led to audiences migrating to remaining platforms, including Russian-owned social media VK and Odnoklassniki (Burkhardt and Wijermars, 2022). The largest user increase occurred on Telegram, the second most popular messaging service in Russia (Burkhardt and Wijermars, 2022) (the most popular being WhatsApp, with 79 per cent of the population using it in October 2024; Telegram closely follows with 72 per cent of the population using it in the same period (TASS, 2024)). While being a key medium for resistance activity, as this book highlights, Telegram is also known to have many channels created or co-opted by pro-Kremlin actors and used for dissemination of state-supporting content (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). This brings to the fore the deep ambivalence of the Telegram platform itself, heightened by the wartime expansion of digital repression (Asmolov, 2024): on the one hand, Telegram has become an important means for circumventing censorship; on the other hand, it is a key instrument of Russian propaganda and governmental efforts to manipulate online discussions.

PART I

Politics

INTERMEZZO 1.1

Politics Beyond the State

I suggest understanding the work of volunteer collectives described in this book as participation in politics. This understanding relies on a particular approach to conceiving politics. This and the next intermezzi delineate this approach. Its starting point is a departure from identifying politics exclusively with the state.

The habit of conceiving politics as confined to the dealings of the state has a long history. Until very recently, this habit has retained its firm grip on the imagination of those interested in understanding contemporary societies. At the beginning of the 20th century, Max Weber famously proposed ‘the term [politics] only to mean the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political* association (*Verband*), which today means a *state*’ (Weber, 1994, p 310, emphasis in original). This proposition logically stems from Weber’s idea that in modern societies – meaning Western industrial democracies – the state monopolized the means of doing politics, which previously in pre-modern societies were available for a wide range of actors to take control of. If the means of doing politics are thus subtly expropriated, then, indeed, we would be looking in vain for politics anywhere outside the official machinery of the state. We would find economic activities, communal life, and private affairs, but no politics.

Various versions of this reasoning have informed decades of political science scholarship, which, accordingly, has dedicated itself to studying state representative institutions, paying particular attention to electoral processes. Critics of this mainstream focus, however, have argued that by looking exclusively at state-bound or formal politics, we could be missing much if not all of the action.

One influential step towards bringing forward a politics beyond the state was made by the sociologist Ulrich Beck. More than three decades ago, Beck (1992, p 223) argued that ‘the “alternative society” is no longer expected to come from parliamentary debates on new laws, but rather from the application of microelectronics, genetic technology and information media’. It is to such technoscientific developments that Beck largely attributed the

proliferation of what he called subpolitics, or politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of nation-states (Beck, 1997). Given that scientific knowledge and technological innovation are so central to contemporary societies, it follows that those involved in their production unwittingly assume political roles by setting the parameters of societal life, affecting not only people's living conditions but also the taken-for-granted assumptions and definitions, such as what 'normal' means or what a healthy lifestyle entails. Moreover, concerns as regards the dangers of new technoscientific developments have driven multiple actors outside the system of formal politics to contest and debate these developments. Beck thus delineated the emergence of a new and distinct field of political action beyond the state: subpolitics.

The story so far looks fairly straightforward: with the ascent of modern industrial societies, all politics became concentrated within massive state bureaucracies. Then the rise of the importance of scientific and technological decisions undermined the state monopoly on politics, inviting scientific, corporate, civil society and other actors to engage in politics too. However, this is not the only story that can be told.

There are other ways of looking at politics in contemporary societies and, in one way or another, these other ways rely on rethinking the nature of the state. State-centric understanding of politics implies that the state is either the apex of essential societal regulation, or, alternatively, a *monstre froid* of sorts occupied with effective and ingenious domination. In both pictures, the state, its existence, and set-up are naturally given. In Beck's writings this inevitability and objective solidity of the state is noticeable too, although he posited the existence of politics beyond the state in the form of subpolitics. Once upon a time, such reasoning goes, official politics was the only politics around, but this is no longer the case because the state political system lost its monopoly on politics due to the enormous complexity of technoscientific developments and now must share the political arena with multiple other concerned actors.

Many thinkers have doubted that the state ever possessed the unity or functionality ascribed to it. Michel Foucault, for instance, and, subsequently, scholars such as Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller considered the state to be more of a 'mythical abstraction' than a solid entity (Foucault, 1991; Rose and Miller, 2010). In the words of Rose and Miller:

the state can be seen as a specific way in which the problem of government is discursively codified, a way of dividing a 'political sphere', with its particular characteristics of rule, from other 'non-political spheres' to which it must be related, and a way in which certain technologies of government are given a temporary institutional durability and brought into particular kinds of relations with one another. (Rose and Miller, 2010, pp 274–5)

If the nature of the state is reconsidered along these lines, then we could assume, like [Boris Holzer and Mads P. Sørensen \(2003\)](#) did, that the state's monopoly on politics is a self-description or, to use a much-abused term, a construction. Multiple ways of shaping and settling societal affairs have never been fully absorbed by formal politics. Political expropriation as posited by Weber was unsuccessful, not least because it may well be impossible for bureaucratic politics to subjugate the manifold sources of influence on societal life. The story told in this book attests to that. What has been successful for a while, though, is obscuring the political significance of anything occurring outside the officially designated spaces like parliaments, institutional headquarters, and voting booths.

The next intermezzo discusses how we can think of politics beyond the state.

INTERMEZZO 1.2

Rethinking Politics

If the state possesses neither a monopoly on politics, nor the solidity and functionality commonly ascribed to it, then how can we think of politics? Let us look around. We might notice that ‘politics’ in many contemporary societies looks like a mishmash of decisions issued by official government bodies, parliamentary debates, media contributions, expert advice, projects that concern a wide variety of matters, and many more activities that span established political arenas and what looks like fields of professional, technical, economic, and even private conduct. On noticing this, it becomes impossible to think of politics as being confined to a specific kind of space or site.

Furthermore, looking even closer, we might also notice the sheer diversity of actors involved, making it impossible to think of politics as being tied to any specific actor group. Both impossibilities are beautifully illustrated in a passage written by Bruno Latour on the politics of climate change:

On page four of my daily newspaper, I learn that the measurements taken above the Antarctic are not good this year: the hole in the ozone layer is growing ominously larger. Reading on, I turn from upper-atmosphere chemists to Chief Executive Officers of Atochem and Monsanto, companies that are modifying their assembly lines in order to replace the innocent chlorofluorocarbons, accused of crimes against the ecosphere. A few paragraphs later, I come across heads of state of major industrialized countries who are getting involved with chemistry, refrigerators, aerosols and inert gases. But at the end of the article, I discover that the meteorologists don’t agree with the chemists; they’re talking about cyclical fluctuations unrelated to human activity. So now the industrialists don’t know what to do. The heads of state are also holding back. Should we wait? Is it already too late? Toward the bottom of the page, Third World countries and ecologists add their grain of salt and talk about international treaties, moratoriums, the rights of future generations, and the right to development. (Latour, 1993, p 1)

Here, political action is dispersed between actors, sites, and different levels of scale. It seeps through and overflows the machinery of formal, state-centred politics. Peculiarly, it also involves actors that are not human: along with governments, corporations, and scientific groups, the issue of climate change has brought refrigerators, the ozone layer, and chlorofluorocarbons into political action.

Detecting politics in various unlikely locations and formats has been an enterprise successfully pursued by many scholars. Politics has been found in laboratories, doctors' offices, and kitchens, involving not only scientists, healthcare professionals, and eco activists but also vaccines, blood screening procedures, and smart kettles (Jasanoff, 2007; Wynne, 2007; Rabeharisoa et al, 2014; Brown, 2015; Marres, 2015). This search has also laid bare that doing politics involves much more diverse activities than talk-centric, official decision making.

Gerard de Vries (2007) illustrated the diversity of activities involved in doing politics with a case of maternal blood screening, known also as the triple test, in the Netherlands. The triple test uses a pregnant person's blood to calculate the risk of the developing baby having Down syndrome, Edwards' syndrome, or other chromosomal conditions and neural tube defects. Analysing the politics of the triple test in the Netherlands, de Vries first delineated the convolutions of official decision making by the Dutch government. Already in 1981, the Dutch government requested advice on the test from the Health Council of the Netherlands: should the test be introduced in the public healthcare system, and if so, on what conditions? Prolonged internal disputes at the Council meant that their advice was finally delivered only in 1988; it contained a recommendation against introducing the test on a routine unsolicited basis, and a proposal to launch a pilot study to screen 20,000–30,000 women, with a minority report arguing against the proposed pilot. In 1989 the Minister of Health decided to proceed with the pilot study, and this decision was confirmed in 1991 and approved by Parliament. In 2002, owing to the improved accuracy of the test, the Health Council reconsidered the situation and recommended introducing it as a form of unsolicited routine screening for all pregnant women. In 2003, however, the Dutch Cabinet rejected the test as a standard screening method to be offered to all pregnant women, citing concerns over the medicalization of pregnancy as the reason. Instead, the test was approved to be offered free of charge only to women known to be at increased risk, such as women over 36 years of age; all others were to be informed of its pros and cons. Thus, more than 20 years of debate, expert advice, and research have failed to provide sufficient grounds for the government – an indisputably political body – to introduce the triple test as a routine screening method in the Dutch healthcare system.

However, de Vries further showed that this official decision making was inconsequential because all along political action was not confined to

the government but was also going on elsewhere, thereby ensuring the de facto introduction of the triple test in the country quite early on. In the 1980s, researchers at Groningen University Hospital began a research project aimed at evaluating the efficacy of the test. As part of this project, pregnant women in the region were offered the test, which was paid for by research funding. In the 1990s other university hospitals began to follow the Groningen example, and the test was introduced on an almost national scale. Its wide availability, and the abundance of information about the test in newspapers, magazines, and on television, effectively brought it close to being a form of routine screening, despite the Dutch government's admonitions that routine screening is a matter for which government approval is required. Reflecting on the politics of the triple test in the Netherlands, de Vries writes:

If a government decision to reject introduction of unsolicited maternal blood screening is considered as a clear-cut example of political action, it seems fair to use the same judgement for the opposite: the de facto introduction of the triple screen on a routine basis in The Netherlands. To be sure, the Groningen researchers and their colleagues at other universities who had started pilot projects did not seek or claim any political privilege or role. They offered the test for scientific purposes and under the authority of their medical licence. They administered the triple screen to large numbers of women, simply because the test required this: for significant results, population-specific normal values need to be determined (and periodically reassessed), which entails large numbers. However, the activities of the research groups effectively eroded ministerial decisions approved by Parliament, challenged the concept of population screening as laid down in the law by introducing a grey area between unsolicited (population) screening and medical tests on individual request, and repeatedly forced the Dutch Cabinet to reconsider its position. If that isn't 'politics', then what is? (de Vries, 2007, pp 786–7)

In this case, political action clearly goes beyond governmental discussions, decisions, and bureaucratic procedures, to include administering the tests, doing statistical analysis, determining normal values, and improving the sensitivity and specificity of the test. Consequently, it becomes impossible to think about politics in terms of any specific activity type.

The state-centred conception of politics has made visible only the tip of the iceberg of political action, the fullness of which we may begin to appreciate by taking these analytical advances seriously. At the same time, however, these advances have encouraged an expansion of the notion of politics to the point of being everywhere, with everything becoming political – a risk

that de Vries also highlighted. Although there might be something in the claim that everything is political, it is not exactly analytically helpful for when we are trying to grasp the workings of contemporary politics. At the same time, as earlier examples illustrate, it is equally unhelpful to attempt to fit the diverse activities involved in formulating and addressing matters of collective concern in contemporary societies into a Procrustean bed of traditional definitions of politics.

One way out of this apparent impasse has been articulated by Noortje Marres (2023) in dialogue with Bruno Latour and earlier thinkers, including philosopher John Dewey. Following Marres, we can think of politics in terms of specific situations. Understanding politics in terms of specific situations involves a rather radical turn from trying to define politics in terms of proper sites and spheres, representative actors, and procedurally suitable activities, to, instead, focusing squarely on the objects of concern, or, as Marres calls them, issues, which animate situations of a particular type. Think, for instance, of the installation of 5G masts in a community. The issue of 5G masts entangles the interests of mobile phone users, local residents, nature lovers, business owners, and so on. These interests, more often than not, are opposed to each other. Situations emerging around such issues throw into stark relief shared dependencies (we all depend on the same atmosphere, shared land, shared infrastructure, each other, a shared healthcare and welfare system), the diverse threats to livelihoods (posed by mutually challenging ways of living, with one person's need for enhanced connectivity turning the world of another person upside down or the desire to prevent birth defects clashing with the commitments of those who do not consider Down syndrome to be a defect preventable by abortion), and corresponding societal divisions.

Following this reasoning, political situations are situations in which shared dependencies produce conflicts, mutually antagonizing people whose ways of living threaten each other and requiring a search for a way out, because it is not possible to proceed as usual any more. Marres (2023, p 977) stresses that these antagonisms are 'not abstract, but arise from concrete, socio-material interdependencies, from our joint but antagonistic implication in what is undeniably, and ... miserably, a shared world'. By starting explorations of contemporary politics with the situations and issues at the centre, we can trace actors, sites, and activities as entangled together, without stumbling upon conceptual boundaries such as those drawn traditionally between state and civil society, or between political sphere and other spheres of societal life. At the same time, while acquiring this freedom, we still do not need to see everything as political. Instead, we can distinguish those situations that are politicizing, insofar as they revolve around thorny issues that implicate actors caught up in antagonistic interdependencies. These interdependencies amplify their differences but also necessitate some sort of collective resolution.

What actors engaging in politics ultimately do, then, is to sort through conflicts between different ways of arranging and articulating the components of a world-in-common – or, in other words, between different versions of this world. Should our world-in-common have Internet that operates at the speed of light and, thus, 5G masts featuring as regular parts of landscape? Should we live in a world where a triple test is part of what constitutes responsible motherhood? Thinking along these lines, we can come to understand politics as ‘the entire set of tasks that allows the progressive composition of a common world’ as [Latour \(2004, p 53\)](#) puts it.

The story that this book tells is located in a situation that is undoubtedly political, brought into being by the issue of war. However, this situation is political in a particular way. Citizens of the war-waging country with antagonistic commitments resist the pressure of the situation to engage with each other, to explicate and contest viewpoints, and to act out their disagreement. No collective search, however conflictual, for a way out is initiated by these actors, despite their inescapable interconnection. I trace their efforts to, instead, solidify and ground ‘their’ incompatible versions of the world, and to pull these as far apart as possible. While these endeavours can never be entirely successful – after all, there is only a single Earth in existence – they do result in divisions of a new kind with the world becoming less common, as we will see towards the end of this book. In this sense, the story is about what can happen to the ‘commonality’ of the shared world when conflicts between antagonistic commitments do not compel mutual engagement.

CHAPTER 1

Healthcare: Politics Otherwise

At the beginning of the events in February I was so pained by all of this. And because the country I am a citizen of pursues politics I cannot agree with, I wanted somehow to find an option for myself, just for myself, to do something good in these hard times and circumstances. Something that I can do. Yes, I know that some people provide financial help to those who are suffering because of this. Now, well, I work as a doctor, the salary is not too high, and I was searching for an option to also do something. At least. Somehow. I had no idea about this [volunteer initiative], but, I think, in some Telegram channel ... I found a group and there were options, for how you can help. There were various activities I'm not brave enough for, yes, and, besides, I thought that perhaps some other activities would be more useful. Something that I can productively do. So, I found this work.

Elizaveta, volunteer physician,
interview, autumn 2022

And, of course, when this horror and nightmare happened, when I'd managed my panic a bit and sort of recollected myself, I immediately started to search for options of what, what I can do in order to... All this is something I need for myself, something I can do to be a bit more certain about myself, so that I'm not just sitting around, but I'm somehow also trying to amend this situation. This is first. And the second, very important point was about what, what I can do, so that later on I could tell my children, in case they ask 'Mom, what did you do?', that I tried, I helped, otherwise it's simply impossible to live. And so it happened that sometime at the beginning of March ... I saw on Facebook that somebody was collecting something and I started

[doing it] too. And then they asked me to check the list of medicines about to be purchased, I said of course, I will help you.

Elena, volunteer physician,
interview, autumn 2022

These two quotes are from my conversations with two physicians who, along with dozens of other medical professionals, became part of a volunteer initiative I call here For Patients (FP). FP emerged in the spring of 2022, with the aim of assisting people from Ukraine in Russia with receiving medical help, and continues to function at the time of finalizing this book in late 2025.

Elizaveta and Elena, like many of their fellow FP members with whom I spoke, started talking to me about FP from describing how they came to be involved in volunteering. These accounts overwhelmingly expressed a sense of desperation at being deeply associated, by virtue of their nationality, with starting a war, attempts to act out belonging to the group of people called Russians differently, and digital media as opening ways to connect with others who were trying to do the same.

These components – (i) inescapable collective ties, which, in the context of conflicting ways of life, fuel (ii) antagonization, and (iii) digital media as a means of organizing alternatives – form the crux of this book. This chapter approaches it by analysing the work of FP and considering it as work of doing politics.

Beginning: digitally mediated contingencies

FP has come to comprise around two hundred volunteer physicians, administrators, and technicians; a sophisticated system of tracking and referring requests; and a set of operational procedures, including division of tasks. FP receives requests for advice and assistance continuously. Requests usually come directly from those who require medical help, as in the following case:

In Kharkiv I was supervised by a psychiatrist, I have problems, feel unwell. There were medicines but they ran out, I feel horrible, always anxious, fear, irritation, I can't sleep, all the time in some nervous tension. I was prescribed [name of a medical drug]. But there is no such drug here, I do not know what to do with myself. (Patient, FP chat, summer 2022)

Sometimes requests come from other volunteers who, for example, assist individual people and families from Ukraine with moving through Russia to the EU: 'A 9 months old baby got sick, probably got a virus from her

mom. Did not breathe well at night. [The family is] in transit, here for 3 days' (Volunteer, FP chat, autumn 2022).

Occasionally, a request might come from one of FP's own physicians, who needs help with managing a particularly difficult case:

The task: an adult patient, cerebral palsy, hyperkinetic paroxysms, self-mutilation. A problem with constipation, pain. Constipation worsened following introduction of drugs [drug 1 and drug 2], the patient has problems with chewing, with mobility, also continuous use of senna which worsens the stomach pains. ... Question: A correction (if possible) of psychopharmacotherapy – constipation is a very serious problem.

P.S. The patient has limited mobility and is barely communicative. Lives with his mother in a PVR [centre for temporary accommodation] in K [a city in western Russia], in harsh conditions. If you are offering a diagnostic method, please take this into account. (FP physician, FP internal chat, spring 2023)

FP runs like clockwork, managing to fulfil a wide variety of requests. However, its emergence and functional organization were anything but planned. Further on, I trace this haphazard process of FP's shaping up to be what it is now and delineate mundane – occasionally to the point of dullness – details of how it happened. By doing so, I hope to depict how, in a short period of time, a resourceful and steadily operating volunteer initiative came into being from nothing.

One possible starting point of this story is a search for ways to 'do something' by Nadezhda, an animation artist living in a large Russian city. Soon after the beginning of war, she was preparing to go to Poland to work as a volunteer meeting Ukrainian refugees at the border, when she discovered that some of those refugees were forced to flee towards Russia, in the direction of aggression. Realizing that some refugees had wound up in her country, Nadezhda started looking for options to assist in Russia. She wrote a post on Facebook expressing her wish to support people from Ukraine in Russia, and asking if anyone knew what was being done already. From the responses to her post, she learned about the so-called centres for temporary accommodation (the Russian abbreviation PVR is used hereafter), which had been hastily opened all over Russia by the authorities, and were often desolate buildings in the middle of nowhere. She also learned about a spontaneously formed community, which later would grow into On the Move described in the [next chapter](#), – the initiative engaged with ferrying Ukrainians across Russia to the EU. Nadezhda began actively discussing the matter of PVRs with the On the Move community, who as a result extended their activities to supporting those who moved to PVRs. Amid

all this, Nadezhda's friend told her that she as a physician wanted to provide medical assistance to Ukrainians in PVRs but did not know how to gain access. Another acquaintance of Nadezhda's left a similar comment under her original Facebook post, saying he was a physician and wanted to volunteer his services. 'Then I thought', Nadezhda told me, 'I have two physician volunteers, but we do not have any platform. So, I simply created this chat [in Telegram] and called it "For Patients", added the two of them into this chat, and shared the link around. And the chat started growing and growing' (interview, summer 2022). Nadezhda's idea for the Telegram group chat was to provide a space for people from Ukraine to ask questions about health and healthcare in Russia, and for volunteer physicians who joined the group to answer their questions and provide other kinds of support where possible. It was created as an open chat, meaning that anyone who found it or was sent a link could join. The original group chat and its name have remained and fed into the formation of the subsequent FP initiative.

Another potential starting point to trace the emergence of FP is the story of a woman from Mariupol, which drew the attention of a medical business executive Ekaterina. Ekaterina, simultaneously with Nadezhda (the two women did not know one another then), was similarly looking for ways of 'counteracting all that is happening', as she put it during an interview with me. Ekaterina considered acts of explicit protest, such as public demonstrations, to be futile in the situation. But an alternative opportunity presented itself when Ekaterina, scrolling through vlogs about the war, stumbled upon information about the same On the Move community Nadezhda found. She immediately followed a link to the On the Move chat in Telegram, scrolled through it, and saw a volunteer asking for assistance in arranging medical help for an elderly woman who had recently fled Mariupol. This is Ekaterina's account of what happened next:

I have worked in the medical business for many years and have an enormous number of contacts in the medical sphere. So, I just messaged one of the people I knew. He owns a network of various care facilities in Russia. He had since left, unfortunately. So, I messaged him, here is the story, can you help? He did help and then wrote me: 'Can we do something systemic? I want to help in a systemic way.' In that Telegram chat [On the Move] I joined, the assistance provided was mostly about transport, providing necessary stuff, finding temporary accommodation, and helping to locate relatives. And we decided that we can do something regarding medical assistance, since we know how it works. ... So, we created a separate mini-chat, invited other people we knew to join, clinic owners, managers, and those simply with many contacts in medicine, and said: 'Let's do something systemic together.' (Ekaterina, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

This Telegram ‘mini-chat’ of medical executives, with the network, expertise, and resources that it brought together, also fed into the subsequent formation of FP initiative as it is today. Unlike the group chat started by Nadezhda, which was open to anyone who found it to join, Ekaterina’s group chat was closed, available only to those who were invited or approved by the administrators. Almost from the outset, its driving idea was to organize collaboration between private clinics for the provision of medical assistance to Ukrainians in Russia.

The two communities emerging around the open FP chat and the closed chat of medical executives soon became aware of each other’s existence. And here, following this mutual discovery, came another point, not a starting one but still defining for the formation of FP as it is today. This point was frustration felt by one of the closed chat participants, Vladimir, with regards to the combination of enormous commitment and lack of structure characteristic of the initial attempts to facilitate medical help. Vladimir joined the closed chat of medical executives soon after it was created, started silently reading it, and observing requests and responses posted in the open FP chat. An experienced healthcare manager, he felt that the efficiency of the initial format of work done through the open FP chat could be improved:

It rattled me several times that clearly simple cases ... The last straw was diarrhoea in a 2-year-old kid, who’d had it for 2 days, first in a train, then at home. He did not have anything serious, clearly. And the entire group could not organize anything for this. ... So, on the one hand, there was some organization, self-organization, but on the other hand, the efficiency of what was happening was very low. There were dozens of physicians there, it’s a large, significant resource. But at the same time, it turned out that they together could not perform basic tasks for refugees. (Vladimir, FP volunteer, interview, autumn 2022)

Concurrently it also became clear to Vladimir and others that the idea of building a network of private clinics to provide medical assistance to people from Ukraine while in Russia, central for the closed chat of medical executives, did not appear realistic:

[T]he idea behind the chat, of private clinics, is totally utopian. This is because, if you are looking structurally at the situation, then refugees have left [Russia] or are distributed across centres for temporary accommodation located in the middle of nowhere in different parts of the country. There are no private clinics there. This is the first situation. Or, second situation, they went to stay in more or less large cities, or they are in transit, which is the third situation. In cases related to situations two and three, private clinics could do something. ...

But if we want to build *a system* of care, then this idea does not work.
(Vladimir, FP volunteer, interview, autumn 2022)

Thus, the emergence of the FP initiative came about through a contingent meeting of two spontaneously formed and digitally mediated communities – one growing around the open FP chat created by Nadezhda and her two physician friends, and the other bringing together medical executives in a closed chat created by Ekaterina. Mutual exchange between the two communities provided a reality check. Can private clinics form an infrastructure for care provision, given the situations Ukrainians in Russia find themselves in and the types of requests they have? Is it enough to invite motivated physicians to an open Telegram chat to make healthcare assistance work? More broadly, the coming together of these two groups prompted an exploration of how healthcare management experience, medical knowledge, digital technologies, and dissent can be combined to facilitate the provision of healthcare assistance in a way that is responsive and practical within local realities.

The following sections delineate how FP settled into a particular form of healthcare assistance provision, and how the functional organization that supports its activities became stabilized.

Tinkering with formats

The initial FP Telegram group chat operated in an open, unregulated format for about a month. It was easy to join this chat through a link that new members could click on to add themselves, which circulated through related communities on Telegram and was forwarded from person to person. Those interested could simply follow the link and be able to immediately request help with healthcare issues. Additional benefits of the platform were that Telegram is one of the most widely used digital media in both Russia and Ukraine, and has a high limit on the number of group chat members (200,000). The FP chat membership stabilized well below the membership limit, fluctuating at around 2,500 to 3,000 people.

Any chat member could post a question or request assistance in the FP chat. In response, medical professionals who joined the chat could sometimes invite a patient for an in-person consultation if a patient and physician happened to be in the same location. Or, when a patient was elsewhere and unable to access adequate healthcare otherwise, chat physicians could attempt to find colleagues located near the patient willing to see them. However, at this initial stage, most often, requests for healthcare assistance prompted attempts to provide medical advice through the chat directly, with multiple specialists offering help and conferring among themselves in the same chat, as the following conversation illustrates:

- Caregiver: Could you please advise, a disabled person, walks with difficulty, cerebral palsy, 55 yo, smells very bad. Wash him constantly, change bed sheets, this does not help, tell me what to do 🧑🧑🧑 [21:03]
- Doctor 1: Are there maybe bed sores? [21:07]
- Caregiver: no bed sores, he walks [21:09]
- Doctor 2: Height and weight of the person? Is there excessive weight? Sometimes a smell is caused by a fungal infection in skin folds – a very specific smell. Often in overweight [persons], with high blood sugar [21:12]
- Doctor 1: Can it be chronic renal insufficiency? Is there swelling? [21:12]
- Caregiver: Height approximately 165, weight I do not know, skinny, approximately [size] 46–48, no swelling [21:14]
- Doctor 1: is the smell of acetone? [21:14]
- Doctor 2: where is the smell coming from – mouth, armpits, crotch? Maybe there is urine leaking?
- Caregiver: No, stinks when he sweats a lot [21:16]
- Caregiver: mouth, armpits, all [21:16]
- Caregiver: Urine is not leaking 🧑🧑🧑 [21:16]
- Doctor 1: Is the sweating profuse, i.e. it drips off or it only smells heavily? [21:17]
- Caregiver: it stinks [21:18]
- Doctor 2 [in response to Caregiver]: these are not the same. Smell from the mouth can be caused by problems with teeth or mucosa, while smell of the sweat is something else. Perhaps doing some tests [is necessary]. Do you have an opportunity? [21:18]
- Doctor 1: would be good to check glucose, creatinine, urea [21:19]
- Caregiver: They came to me from [a town in Lugansk region], spent a month under bombs, now all is well, but this smell coming from my brother I think it is not normal [21:21]
- Doctor 1: Certainly, this is not normal. [21:24]
- Doctor 2: I agree with [Doctor 1], it is necessary to do tests. We can write in more detail which ones. Do you have an opportunity? [21:24]
- Caregiver: Write which ones, if it is bloodwork, we will try to do it [21:26]

- Doctor 1: glucose, creatinine, urea, CRP and a complete blood count and complete urine analysis [21:28]
- Doctor 2: also ALT, AST, bilirubin [21:30]
- Doctor 1: yes, of course [21:31]
- Caregiver: I registered them in [a town in Moscow region], we received a call from the polyclinic for them to come get covid vaccination and that's it, nothing about that they were, for a month, freezing and starving 🙏 my son with height 176 weights 43 kg and carried my brother on his back 🤖 [22:36]
- Doctor 1: It is necessary to act, to complain about health issues, do not wait for sympathy from the polyclinic [21:39]
- Doctor 1: also photofluorography is needed [21:39]
- Caregiver: I understand everything but he barely walks, so I am asking here, maybe some physicians would tell me what to do, I work, have no time, I am the only breadwinner for all of them [22:44]
- Doctor 2: where are you? What is their [legal] status – is there CMI [compulsory medical insurance] certificate? [21:45]
- Caregiver: we are in [a town in Moscow region], no status, they just came to me when everything burned down in Ukraine [21:47]
- Doctor 2: I see. Then perhaps do minimal testing on a paid basis? [21:48]
- Doctor 2: and we then will provide a consultation based on the testing results [21:48]
- Doctor 1: Colleagues, let's decide on the minimal number of tests [21:49]
- Caregiver: We will try to do it [21:50]
- Doctor 1: Ok, will decide tomorrow [21:51]
- Caregiver: My daughter works as a nurse, but she lives in [another town in Moscow region], maybe she comes and takes blood [21:56]
- Doctor 1: This is a solution [21:57]
- Doctor 2: To make it informative and not excessively expensive:
Total protein
Creatinine
Glucose
ALT
AST
Bilirubin
Thyrotropic hormone
Complete blood count

- Complete urine analysis [21:59]
- Caregiver: It is not given that she comes [21:59]
- Caregiver: Thank you all who responded, I understood that we have to do blood tests and then we will see, thank you [22:02]

This conversation, which took place in spring 2022, illustrates that initially the FP chat was meant to be self-regulating. It was up to physicians to scan the chat for requests and react to those requests that matched their expertise. Most of the action took the form of requesting, clarifying, discussing, advising and occurred in the chat itself, with physicians occasionally arguing with one another about the best ways to address the requests, medically and logistically.

Nadezhda soon felt that the FP chat could not remain in this free-flowing format and needed formal moderation; the period of trying out different moderation rules lasted for about two weeks. Nadezhda considered how the chat should be regulated so that requests were not left unanswered and physicians could easily see which requests were still open without scrolling through lengthy chat discussions. She started by introducing two simple rules. First, medical professionals in the chat were asked to refrain from addressing requests directly in the chat, and to move the discussion, instead, to personal messages. A physician who was ready to address a specific request should indicate this in the group chat, and invite the person requesting help to talk via personal messages. A person whose request was addressed was to modify their initial message to reflect that no more input was needed. Accordingly, for a short while, efforts to receive, provide, and organize healthcare assistance looked like this:

- Parent: Hello 🤝
 We are a family from [a town in Donetsk region], now we are in Moscow
 My daughter, 4 years, after everything she went through, started severely stuttering. We consulted a neurologist from Ukraine, she prescribed a drug [name of the drug], I could not find this drug here and a substitute can only be purchased with a prescription 🙄👩
 Please help 🙏
 Edit: help received 🙏 [16:49]
- Nadezhda: While we are awaiting for structure [of assistance provision by FP], please discuss such matters in pm [personal messages]. [Parent], please, when you receive assistance – edit the message that the situation is resolved. Hope very much that assistance is found ❤️ [16:49]

Doctor [in
response
to Parent]: Please write me a pm [16:58]
Parent [in
response to
Nadezhda]: ok, thank you 🙏
I very much hope so too 🙏🙏 [17:01]

The second rule was to clearly flag emergency situations and avoid attempting to manage these situations online. As Nadezhda put it: ‘We also asked that, if a person is writing “my child has fever of 40 [°C]” to not advise analgin [trade name of painkiller metamizole], but [to advise] to call for an ambulance’ (FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022). Volunteer moderators, recruited through larger communities such as On the Move, were tasked with enforcing these two rules. If there was no moderator available, which mostly happened during the night, then the FP chat would be closed for messages.

Within a few days of introducing the new rules, the FP chat operation became more sophisticated. The newly assembled chat moderation team came up with the following system to differentiate between various kinds of requests, and to track more closely whether requests had been addressed:

Nadezhda: Dear friends. While we are developing a system and deciding which way would be most convenient, this is how the chat will be working.
A person who requests assistance writes at the beginning of their message several hashtags – city, is consultation requested online or offline, topic/physician specialization. After that a brief description of the problem – name, age of the patient, what happened, what the question is. Also a form must be completed [link to a Google table], it will increase chances that a physician sees the request and it does not get lost even after several days.
A physician who is ready to respond to the request, writes ‘plus’ (+) in response to the message
AND PEOPLE GO TO PMs
In order to check whether a request is taken or not, one must press on the message and check responses.
If there is a plus in response to a message and the request is being addressed, physicians see that they do not have to respond.
If 10 physicians are addressing one request, this is a wrong distribution of resources.

The physician messages the patient and all discussions are held in personal messages!

For example:

#Moscow #online #gastroenterologist

My stomach hurts often, I want to know which tests I need

All discussions of [health] problems in the chat will be deleted

Requests without hashtags too

Thank you all very much! [11:21]

As a result of this further modification of the system, some efforts to receive, provide, and organize healthcare assistance started to look like the following exchange:

Volunteer: #online #bronchitis #offline #moscow #moscow region
A child 3 years old with bronchitis. Friends, who can remotely take a look at the medical file and documents?
The boy is in PVR of [town in Moscow region]. I am afraid that offline I would not be able to find anyone willing to go there in person [16:39]

Doctor: I can look [16:56]

Nadezhda [in response to volunteer]: the request is taken [16:57]

This exchange took place on the same day that Nadezhda posted the message introducing the changes in the chat operation. Subsequently, ensuring that the format was followed required chat admins and moderators to post reminders about using hashtags and discussing specific requests only via personal messages. Where longer discussions nonetheless were held in the group chat, moderators would forward the advice to the authors of the requests, delete the posts from the group chat, and mark the original request as ‘taken’. Almost immediately it also became clear that asking patients and/or their caregivers to fill in a Google table with details of their requests was not feasible as nobody actually filled it in. Consequently, moderators took it upon themselves to include details of the requests that had not received responses by the end of each day in a Google table accessible to the chat physicians, and sent reminders to physicians to check the table regularly.

Alongside this tinkering with format of connecting requests for healthcare assistance with volunteer medical professionals in the open FP chat, this chat was becoming acquainted with the chat of medical executives. Core

members of both began discussing ways to make their shared commitment to providing healthcare assistance to people from Ukraine while in Russia work better. The following section describes how, over the course of about three more weeks, the FP arrived at the format it adopted for long-term work.

Assembling care collective

The work format that the communities of the two chats (open FP chat and closed chat of medical executives), now united, have eventually settled on relies on several core components. The first component is an information leaflet titled ‘On Healthcare in Russia’. The creation of this leaflet was one of the outcomes of the research undertaken by Vladimir (the aforementioned volunteer healthcare manager) into how access to healthcare in the country is regulated. After rejecting the idea of building a parallel private clinics-based care system as being impossible to implement, the collective had to accept the idea of somehow engaging the much further-reaching and denser network of public healthcare organizations. Medical executives who came to be involved in the initiative worked in the private sector, but this was not why they did not know right away whether public healthcare organizations could be employed for their purposes and if so, on which conditions. Instead, as Ekaterina explained, ‘procedurally, public healthcare is extremely complicated’ (FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022), with different rules applied to different types and levels of healthcare, and diverse practices on the ground often running contrary to one or another set of official rules. This general ambiguity meant that the most prevalent response of public healthcare organizations to people from Ukraine at the time – refusal to provide care – could not be considered definitive. And, indeed, Vladimir’s research unearthed that this practice was contrary to existing legal provisions:

According to existing laws and regulations, actually, they [people from Ukraine] are entitled right away, without any CMI [compulsory medical insurance] certificate, to receive all healthcare that a Russian citizen is entitled to, except for planned hospitalization. ... But the thing is that neither volunteers, nor refugees, nor those on the ground, I mean public healthcare organizations, are aware of this. (Vladimir, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Consequently, Vladimir and others created the leaflet ‘On Healthcare in Russia’. The one-page leaflet summarized the legal provisions, listing the different kinds of healthcare accessible for free to people from Ukraine, including all outpatient and emergency inpatient care. It also cited the relevant laws and regulations that grant these rights and highlighted that

neither a CMI (compulsory medical insurance) certificate nor official refugee or asylum seeker status were required. The leaflet was shared and pinned in the FP Telegram group chat to inform the members. But its most important function is not the provision of information; ‘On Healthcare in Russia’ has become the basis for classifying and allocating different types of requests, as explained by Vladimir:

Further, I offered to do the following. Basically, my subjective estimate is that 70% of requests that come [to FP] require either simply some sympathetic attention from a person with medical training, or they can be easily solved by a referral to public healthcare. ... So, I suggested, let’s have these 70% of requests dealt with by a limited number of people. ... Let’s do it like adults, set up a back office that collects all the requests and responds to those it can deal with by itself. Like a child with diarrhoea does not require two days and 50 messages in the chat. (Vladimir, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Vladimir further added that the remaining, more complex requests would be forwarded by the ‘back office’ to the FP volunteer physicians, while the extremely complex requests would be dealt with collectively by the FP organizers, with their vast networks of contacts in medicine.

Accordingly, the back office became the second core component of FP’s work format after the merger of the two communities. This is not a physical office where volunteers sit and process requests. Instead, several people in different locations, working in shifts, receive requests for healthcare assistance via Telegram or telephone. Most requests arrive via Telegram, but for those who have no access to a smartphone or do not know how to use the app, a multi-channel toll-free number was provided by one of the private clinics represented in the chat of medical executives. Initially, operators with medical training receiving requests via both Telegram and phone were allocated by these clinics too. In time, several physicians who joined the FP initiative switched from giving medical consultations to processing incoming requests as back-office operators. With Ekaterina occasionally stepping in to cover shifts, the initiative normally manages to have the virtual back office manned every day.

As predicted by Vladimir, many incoming requests end up being adequately handled by the back-office operators, such as in the following example:

- Caregiver: Child has acute otitis. On Sun. Amoxiclav was prescribed. Terrible diarrhoea started. Yesterday 9 times. Which antibiotic I can change Amoxiclav for? [10:17]
- Caregiver: In polyclinic all slots are taken, and I won’t be able to transport him with diarrhoea anyway. [10:18]

- Operator: Hello, change it for amoxicillin, without clavulanic acid
It is the acid that causes diarrhoea
Dosage of amoxicillin should correspond to the dosage prescribed by the doctor [10:33]
- Operator: how old is the child [10:34]
- Caregiver: 3 years. 14 kilos [10:34]
- Operator: Try changing for amoxicillin to avoid changing the antibiotic group since you already started taking it
Dosage is the same (it is calculated based on amoxicillin anyway) [11:03]
- Caregiver: thank you very much [11:03]

For this request, the operator was able to answer the medical question herself. Other types of requests that FP operators can usually handle directly themselves concern access to healthcare in Russia for those who are not in transit at the time of contacting FP and appear to be concerned with relatively simple health conditions, as in the following exchange:

- Patient: I need an ENT [ear, nose and throat] doctor, I do not have an insurance number and cannot get it, I have no legal status, we just rent an apartment and have temporary residence [14:57]
- Patient: What should I do?? [14:58]
- Operator: Hello, you do not need an insurance number or legal status to have an appointment with ENT in a polyclinic. Just go there, they are obliged to give you an appointment according to the decree 1134 (see the leaflet ['On Healthcare in Russia'] attached) [15:05]

In responding to this request the operator used the leaflet 'On Healthcare in Russia' to refer a patient to the public healthcare system. Indeed, as Ekaterina pointed out, the strategy of informing people about their rights turned out to often be sufficient to facilitate access to healthcare in relatively simple cases:

When we are asked, please can you find some doctor acquaintance, often, we just have to explain that you do not need to search for some friend-of-a-friend doctor who is willing to do you a favour. Here are your rights. You go to this polyclinic; they must provide medical assistance. If they refuse, you go to a head of department or director, show these regulations and decrees, and say that by refusing to help you, the clinic violates the law. And it usually settles the issue. Many requests, it turns out, can be addressed just like this. (Ekaterina, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

However, the process of referring a patient to a public healthcare facility even in situations where such a facility exists in the vicinity of the person needing medical assistance and is equipped to provide it, often takes more than simply providing a patient with information. Varvara, a general practitioner at a public polyclinic in central Russia who has volunteered as an FP back-office operator since the summer of 2022, spoke at length about the difficulties:

Many difficulties are related to the difference between how things are supposed to work and how they actually work. The system sounds as though it works beautifully but how this works in real life is only known to those poor people who are trying to receive assistance [from the public healthcare system] and who are nobodies to this system. ... Not all patients can insist. And when you are asking them to be firmer, they can't. Some are just the type who can't do it, others feel uneasy, again, being on this strange territory, being in such stress. ... And we've had situations when we had to call to some deputy head physician in some regional hospital in some little town and ask: why did you send away a mother with a 5-year-old child based on the fact that she does not have a CMI certificate? She has a right to receive help. Then they usually calm down and provide help. (Varvara, FP volunteer, interview, autumn 2022)

Thus, the act of referring can sometimes also involve convincing, supporting, and insisting. Still, Varvara confirmed from her extensive experience that getting a consultation with common medical specialists, such as ENT physicians, 'in reality is not a problem. You come to a reception desk, ok, maybe you are sent away. Then you go to a head of department, put your foot down, tell them you are a refugee, that is all, usually then you are given an appointment, no questions asked' (Varvara, FP volunteer, interview, autumn 2022). A harder problem to solve is those cases in which a person needs medical assistance beyond the limited standard services that public healthcare organizations are equipped to provide. Varvara gave the example of patients in her polyclinic who wait half a year for an echocardiogram, illustrating the general scarcity of resources in the public healthcare system. She stressed that this scarcity, paired with a convoluted referrals system, negatively impacts access to care for all patients, but especially for refugees.

Requests from patients who should have access to public healthcare, but who in reality cannot gain access, plus those requests that can be fully or partly dealt with remotely online, are forwarded by back-office operators to FP physicians. Such forwarding, as well as the request standardization and tracking, are enabled by a combination of software, a Telegram bot, and an Airtable database, which are collectively referred to by my interviewees as

‘the engine’. The engine is the third core component of the work format adopted by the FP initiative, in addition to the information leaflet and the back office. The engine allows the work of the back office to remain backstage, making it invisible to all but the group organizers and admins and select FP physicians.

If in the original FP chat, almost everything took place in the chat itself – patients’ requests, physicians’ responses, and various opinions regarding the best way to address specific requests, all visible to anyone who joined the chat – the subsequently adopted work format moved most of these behind the scenes. People requesting assistance from FP are instructed to send their requests through a bot that asks a series of standardized questions about the patient, including their age, location, contact details, and health situation. Medical documents related to the patient’s condition, such as test results or hospital records, are sent directly to the FP physician who takes on the request. Back-office operators perform a multi-functional role, which apart from sorting the requests involves moderating the chat (including posting reminders that requests for healthcare assistance must be sent via bot), and providing answers to simple questions such as ‘hello, how can I increase my blood iron?’

Requests for healthcare assistance sent via bot are automatically added to a table on an Airtable platform. The small number of requests received via the toll-free phone line are entered into the table by back-office operators. The operators then forward requests to FP physicians with the relevant specialization, such as paediatricians, rheumatologists, or neurologists, instead of physicians scrolling through the chat for requests that matched their expertise. Information about FP physicians’ specializations was collected when the initial FP open chat was being reformatted following the involvement of the community of medical executives. All FP physicians were invited to fill in a registration form, also using Telegram bot for this purpose, which remains open for physicians who subsequently join the collective.

The work format now looks like this: a request arrives and is entered into the Airtable; an FP back-office operator categorizes the new request as suitable for an immediate response (either through a referral to the public healthcare system or by providing an answer themselves) or as requiring a consultation by an FP physician. Where a consultation is required, the operator determines the appropriate specialization and forwards the request to all physicians registered as having this specialization in the FP database. Physicians receive the request in the form of a Telegram message with information provided by the patient or their caregiver, and automated options to ‘Delete’ or ‘Accept’ the request, as well as the option to send a Telegram message back with comments. The reply option can be used by FP physicians to advise that another specialization is more suitable in their opinion, or to discuss the limitations of providing care remotely in a specific case. The first physician who presses ‘Accept’ is registered in the system as

having taken the request; they will then receive the contact details of the patient and initiate contact, most often via Telegram. FP physicians are asked to update the back office on the outcomes of the consultation.

Before examining in more detail the work of the FP physicians in the next section, I briefly summarize here what this description of the FP operation format indicates about how healthcare assistance provision, or one could say care, is enabled. Volunteer physicians are central to the FP initiative, but we can also see that their efforts are shaped, directed, and amplified by other elements of the FP collective. This collective has come to include people with diverse healthcare, organizational, and technical knowledge, as well as things such as the leaflet ‘On Healthcare in Russia’, work arrangements like the back office, and technological tools, above all, the engine. When assembled, the FP collective has combined physicians’ work with a Telegram group chat, request sorting processes managed by the back-office operators, and resources such as diverse networks of contacts of a small group of medical executives. The care the FP strives to provide, then, is enabled by a combination of these heterogeneous elements, which together form this contingent collective.

Doing care

FP physicians do many things. To start with, they assist volunteers who arrange the transportation of people from Ukraine with limited mobility and/or health issues through Russia to the EU. Unsurprisingly, there is no statistical data currently available on the health status of people who have left occupied Ukrainian territories at different points of time since February 2022. But several FP physicians among those I spoke to observed that such transportations are becoming more medically difficult as time goes on. One possible reason for this is that young, healthy people were more likely to leave their homes early on in the war, without much assistance from volunteers; those who stayed behind tended to be older, less mobile, and less healthy, and the more so, the more willing they appeared to stay close to home regardless of potential consequences. Consequently, in time, those whose transportation was arranged by volunteers were increasingly likely to be fragile people for whom moving was not an option they had considered until they became completely unable to fend for themselves due to further deterioration of their health and/or destruction of their home. For instance, one morning in the winter of 2024, three consecutive requests were sent via the FP bot by different volunteers:

1. Hello, I am a coordinator. There is an old woman without medical documents. We only know that she has a hip fracture and high blood pressure, [drug name] is used for control.

2. Good morning! Need a consultation about controlling blood pressure during transportation of an old woman after a stroke.

3. Hello! Need a consultation, a woman is in [occupied territory], soon departs to her relatives. She has episodes of increased blood pressure, up to 180/190-90. There is a need for a medication for the journey in order to safely decrease blood pressure when it rises like this ... There is no way to get an appointment with a physician, in [occupied territory] this is not working. Thank you!

Responding to such requests usually takes more than a single consultation. I include a long quote from a physician, Inna, who describes how she medically supported one such transportation. The patient she was caring for arrived from the occupied territories at a city in western Russia where Inna was based; Inna worked to prepare him for the subsequent journey to the EU, including collecting medical documents needed for EU healthcare providers:

This was a person who survived a myocardial infarction in the heat of the initial events. He was in [a city at the epicentre of the fighting]. Of course, no medical help was provided in this case. Then, probably upon leaving that place, he ended up in a hospital in [a city in the occupied territory]. A coronary angiography was performed. In short, he had a severe myocardial infarction with delayed provision of medical help for non-medical reasons, with massive heart damage, heart failure, and severe multivessel coronary artery disease. And he was moving abroad with his family. So, my task was, basically, to prepare him for transportation.

I do not meet everyone [every FP patient] in person, but him I invited several times to come to my office. I work in a private clinic, so I needed to invite him at the end of my shift, without announcing his presence etc. He was a very serious case, he would have been serious even without everything else going on. Medically speaking, he was, perhaps, the most serious [in Inna's experience with FP so far]. So, meanwhile, his situation became aggravated, he started worsening in front of our eyes, and we called an ambulance for him. At that point my role was to explain that no, there is no reason to fear, yes, we have to call an ambulance. Yes, he needs to go to that hospital where the ambulance takes him, yes, he should agree to all interventions, to coronary angiography, to stent placement. So, on the one side there was an ambulance physician who was swearing [at him], on the other side there was me on the phone saying [to the patient], never mind, never mind, let them swear, they have to take you. Overall, it ended well, more or less. He was hospitalized and received a stent. And also he received coronary angiography because the angiography he had in

[a city in the occupied territory], we could not obtain it. We needed to pass it [to colleagues] abroad. But we could not obtain it because it was impossible to transfer this data, the records of the procedure. So a new one was performed here, a stent was placed, let's say the condition stabilized, but remained serious. The patient had quite severe anaemia. I had to again invite him to my clinic and administer an intravenous drip, to be there with him. Also his family were there, he was not alone, he was with his family. And then they went to the border, I know that they crossed it. In the country they went to, they were able to receive medical help. But, for medical reasons, the prognosis is uncertain... I remember him well because I was afraid that they would not leave [Russia], that this all would end badly somehow. (Inna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Inna's story highlights that providing medical assistance during transportations is a continuous and uncertain process, for reasons that include the frequently unstable condition of those being transported and the usual lack of documents detailing their medical histories.

In addition to providing assistance during medically complicated transportations, FP physicians also assist those who at the time of their contact with FP are not in the process of moving, or who are moving but without pre-existing severe health issues. The diversity of the work of the volunteer physicians is enormous. While no written account can contain an exhaustive list, I shall attempt to give a sense of what is involved by focusing on three sets of activities: (i) differentiating between emergencies and non-emergencies; (ii) shifting the boundary between emergencies and non-emergencies; and (iii) trying to adhere to evidence-based medicine.

FP physicians, both those with extensive prior experience of providing consultations remotely and those who started consulting online upon joining the initiative, unanimously consider the first set of activities – differentiating between emergencies and non-emergencies – as paramount. In the words of Vera, a recently retired paediatrician:

the most important task is to assess the condition, not to diagnose, but to understand how serious it is. And it is difficult to do remotely. ... [because] you need to have a person in front of you to understand their condition adequately, you need to see them, better yet touch them, and smell them. (Vera, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Consultations by FP physicians rarely involve video calls, owing to poor connection, problems with patients' phones, a lack of privacy, or simply the lack of opportunity for patients and their caregivers to sit down and have a focused conversation. Therefore, understanding the seriousness of a person's

health condition relies on extensive message-based conversations about a person, their complaints, surroundings, and medical histories, and, where possible and relevant, on photos such as of rashes, deformities, or bites.

Inna, who previously worked in telemedicine quality assessment, further elaborated:

The most important thing is to distinguish something that constitutes an emergency, something that requires active intervention right now, from something that is not quite an emergency, something that can wait. The first is dangerous and we must start yelling: stop everything, call an ambulance. If we decide there is no immediate danger, then we can deal with it ourselves. (Inna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

When there is no immediate danger, FP physicians will proceed with a consultation. Those to whom I spoke estimated that they manage to adequately address many of the requests they take on. For example, Evgenii, a surgeon, explained:

For example, there was a man with stomach pains. During a conversation it transpired that the situation was not an acute situation anymore, it was quite old and had a chronic character, stress related. We discussed which tests he already did, which drugs he took, and decided what he needs to do in the future to avoid serious problems and to clarify what it [the problem] is exactly and where to go from here. Then there were, of course, a couple of suspicions of acute appendicitis, which were not confirmed. Probably due, first of all, to the fact that a person is nervous and so on. And, of course, several abscesses, with photos. Such photos usually do not show much because a person who is not a specialist usually does not know what a photo should show and how. So, they often had to take the photos again. But it usually went well, that is, cases of erysipelas, some boils and so on, animal bites. ... So, I simply recommended a treatment that would be the most effective broad-spectrum treatment for a case, then tracked the progress. And it all worked. ... Really, most people only need care, attention and, perhaps, some information about what to do, how dangerous it is. Therefore, overall, they receive what they request, they receive help. (Evgenii, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Elizaveta, a neurologist, added that at least part of the assistance she provides to people who send requests to FP is not strictly medical:

And some help is mostly about support, being in touch, answering questions which are mostly due to anxiety because people face very

difficult situations, these women – very often these are women who are left alone with only god knows what. So, this is something more humanitarian than medical. I message them, which I normally do not do for patients, normally I don't give my personal number. But to them I write to call me, to write me, to contact me. (Elizaveta, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Thus, on receiving requests, FP physicians focus first on differentiating urgent life-threatening situations from less urgent ones, and take on the latter. The second set of their activities that I wish to highlight – shifting the boundary between emergencies and non-emergencies – may sound strange. What I refer to here has to do with the fact that there are different ways to define what constitutes an emergency. And sometimes what FP physicians position as an emergency is not treated as such by the public healthcare system.

In response, the FP physicians may occasionally accept a refusal of the public healthcare system to treat a situation of their patient as an emergency and work around this refusal:

I remember this situation with pyelonephritis, I mean it was pre-existent but exacerbated after [hiding from shelling in] basements. So, the patient described the clinical picture, yes, very similar. I thought, because this has been going on for several days, and the girl was subdued, there was fever, I thought that an ambulance would hospitalize pyelonephritis, there are wards full of pyelonephritis. So, I told them to call an ambulance. The ambulance came and said you know, clinically she is not dying, so this is not really an emergency. Do the tests and then we will hospitalize you. ... so I told the patient what tests they need and then, based on the results, prescribed antibiotics. We were in contact later, all [symptoms] were gone. (Anna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

In this situation, the patient's condition, its diagnosis, and treatment were not too complex or demanding, so the ambulance crew's refusal to take the patient was not ultimately consequential. In theory, the family could have gone to a polyclinic, a public outpatient facility but given the possibility of further delays they decided to do paid-for tests, and on receiving the results Anna provided treatment advice.

There are situations, however, in which the stakes are much higher. Faced with the refusal of an ambulance to hospitalize a patient in such situations, FP physicians do not have many options beyond attempting to shift the boundary between emergency and non-emergency in such a way as to not leave any room for doubt regarding the urgent and life-threatening nature of

their patient's condition. One situation that necessitated such an intervention by a group of FP physicians was described by Varvara, an FP operator:

I remember very well a case of a man with obliterating endarteritis. This is a disorder that affects the arteries of the legs, when occlusion of the arteries occurs, metabolic problems occur. And they [such patients], due to these metabolic problems, develop sores, and a leg literally begins to rot. ... And they are in tremendous pain, which almost nothing can numb, apart from narcotic painkillers. Therefore, it is very hard for them. And one such man we were trying to hospitalize for a long time, to different hospitals, but they kept telling us that it is not possible without a CMI certificate. (Varvara, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

In this situation the patient was suffering from acute pain caused by his rotting leg, but his condition was not considered an emergency by the various ambulance crews who attended him. The patient did not have a CMI certificate, therefore non-emergency hospitalization was not an option since people from Ukraine without such a certificate are entitled to many types of healthcare, with the exception of non-emergency hospitalization as detailed in the FP leaflet 'On Healthcare in Russia'. Varvara explained the logic of classifying this patient's condition as a non-emergency in the following way:

Unfortunately, this is the logic of our healthcare. There might be something to it, because in the presence of certain disorders some symptoms can be considered not exactly normal but to be expected, and, consequently, they are not seen as requiring, for instance, hospitalization and some urgent massive interventions. But in this situation, taking account of the fact that the person has not been seen by a doctor for a very long time and is under tremendous pain that cannot be numbed, this was an emergency, emergency condition. (Varvara, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

To break through this logic, FP physicians devised a strategy of presenting a patient's condition in such a way that it does not appear to be a 'normal' or expected complication of a chronic disease. In other words, they attempt to shift the boundary between an emergency and a non-emergency:

We managed to get him in an ambulance. Our surgeon provided lengthy instructions about what to tell [the crew], they faked fever, something else too. Long story short, they refused to hospitalize him, and we had to produce a picture of a systemic process [occurring in the body], signalled by a fever. Because if it is localized, then, well, sorry, it

is your problem. Leg is rotting? It happens, not a big deal. But if there is a fever, then yes, then there is trouble, it can be infection, the person must be rescued. (Varvara, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

In situations such as this, where a health condition is progressive and the necessary interventions are not adequately or promptly available through outpatient polyclinics, FP physicians will attempt to limit the possibilities for the public healthcare system to classify their patient's case as a non-emergency. They creatively attempt to shift the boundary between a medical emergency and non-emergency, in such a way that their patient falls squarely into the emergency category.

The final set of FP physicians' activities that I wish to highlight can cumulatively be called trying to adhere to evidence-based medicine ideas. I did not expect the topic of evidence-based medicine (EBM) to be so central to the volunteer physicians' work, but considering the emphasis placed on EBM by FP physicians and organizers in the FP chat, in internal discussions, and in conversations with me, I have come to appreciate its significance. It is noticeable that physicians explicitly draw on EBM principles when responding to patients' and caregivers' questions, such as in this conversation:

- Caregiver: hello, my husband was prescribed these medicines [photo of the prescription attached to the message] but we cant buy them, too expensive for us. Could you help 🙏
Maybe somebody has these but does not use [14:08]
- Doctor: none of these is a medicine with proven efficacy and safety. You can easily economize [on them] [14:21]
- Caregiver: oh, this is for dilation of blood vessels of the brain [14:24]
- Doctor: I understand that this was an attempt to improve something, but all three drug names are 'snake oil'. Not all doctors in Russia adhere to evidence-based medicine, I am very sorry. [14:27]
- Caregiver: but what are the alternatives that work then? Could you please respond if you know this stuff [14:28]
- Doctor: It depends on the diagnosis. At any rate this entire concept of 'dilation of the brain blood vessels', 'improving nutrition of the brain' has not shown effectiveness. You need an advice of a competent neurologist. [14:34]
- Caregiver: but where to find him... [14:35]
- Doctor: try for starters in our bot [link to the bot] [14:36]

FP physicians and operators regularly post reminders in the open chat that the FP community practices EBM, and that health-related advice given by persons without adequate medical training should not be considered and will

be deleted. Occasionally, FP physicians may question the degree of ‘EBM-ness’ of each other’s responses, but the resulting discussions usually concern minor aspects of the issue under consideration and general agreement largely prevails.

Adhering to the EBM ideas in FP work often requires doing more than citing proven or unproven effectiveness when giving medical advice. On the one hand, this has to do with lack of trust FP physicians may face, as explained by Anna. Anna contrasted her usual patients, who come to her private clinic for in-person consultations, with patients with whom she engages through FP as a volunteer, and acknowledged that the former have more reasons to trust her than the latter:

Sometimes, patients come to you from a doctor in a [public] polyclinic with a list of prescriptions. Then you explain that no, you do not need this, you don’t need antibiotics right now. Since this person came to you [for a second opinion], they do have an interest in [hearing] something alternative. But here people [who make requests through FP], they do not understand [when I say] that this is not right, this has to be done differently, [because] this is a treatment they have been receiving their whole life. So why would they trust me, a doctor they do not know, a doctor they have not even seen – this is an online appointment. And not even an appointment but an online conversation or a call. They know nothing about me apart from that I am a paediatrician and I help refugees. And then I tell them such things, not just tell, explain, back up. But still it is surprising for people, how come we are not going to, I don’t know, give a cough syrup, how come we are not going to prescribe a hundred nose drops. This is difficult. (Anna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Given this context, Anna explained, when her FP patients receive recommendations from her that deviate from what they are used to or expect, they can be perplexed, upset, and reluctant to follow her advice. FP physicians are mindful of the limited opportunities for their FP patients to develop trust in their recommendations and also of the enormous stress that these patients are under. They adopt flexible strategies to respond. In some situations, physicians try to combine EBM approaches with what a particular patient is used to, where such a combination would not be harmful, as described by Tamara, a neurologist:

I rarely try to change my patients’ minds, but I know that, say, such a diagnosis does not exist. I tell them that nowadays we approach this a bit differently, let us try this. ... you know, I am a supporter of evidence-based medicine. But sometimes I understand that, say, a

person thinks that this and that helps him. I say, ok, let's do it, I will prescribe you this and that, but please keep also this in mind, and this is also important. So sometimes I agree [to give the patient what they want], yes. But when something is treated not by a vitamin [as a patient expects], but by an anti-anxiety drug, then I prescribe anti-anxiety drugs too. And I also stress multiple times, it is very, very important for you, important to not discontinue [the medication], if you have any questions, please contact me. And it happened a couple of times, people had questions, but we resolved them. Overall, I have understood that many people have some outdated diseases [diagnoses] that usually are not used as a diagnosis nowadays. But a person, a person who is set on the idea that everything will be well for them only after a specific treatment, I am trying not to argue with them, really, because things are already difficult for them, without me adding to it. (Tamara, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Other situations are less suitable for attempting such a pragmatic approach. For example, FP physicians are often contacted by other volunteers who purchase medicines for people from Ukraine with requests to check whether the list of medicines about to be purchased contain any 'snake oil'-type substances. Such requests can come from volunteers who support one person or family, or from volunteers who procure medicines for PVRs in bulk. Volunteer groups who provide assistance to people living in PVRs (about which I shall say more in the [next chapter](#)) may have an agreement with a specific physician who always checks the list of medicines before they are purchased. This is a role performed by Inna, an FP physician who, apart from consulting FP patients, also regularly checks lists of medicine ordered by volunteers for several PVRs:

I receive lengthy lists of drugs, many of which are drugs with unproven effectiveness, many drugs that do not impact prognosis, duplicate drugs, inadequate drugs. But people took them [before], people [in the PVRs] trust in these drugs, the volunteers empathize with them, sometimes they perceive [my] refusals [to purchase certain drugs] as something offensive. ... I do that, me and another physicians. We are used to that. (Inna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

In these situations there is less space for adaptation, and FP physicians insist on not mass purchasing drugs without proven effectiveness.

It should be noted that practising EBM – that is, relying on the best available research and integrating it with clinical experience and the patient's situation to guide medical care – is not widespread among the medical community in

Russia. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that ideas about what constitutes reliable evidence of the effectiveness of treatments and diagnostic procedures commonly used among Russian medical professionals, diverge significantly from how reliability has been conceived, generally, by EBM advocates. Given this local context, the strong adherence to the EBM ideas by the entire FP collective is atypical and surprising considering there is no screening of volunteer physicians who want to join FP. In their conversations with me, however, FP physicians shared that they do not find it surprising that these are proponents of EBM who self-selected to constitute the FP community:

My theory is: common sense. I mean if a person has common sense, then they are more inclined to realistically perceive all events, not just those that concern medicine. What is evidence-based medicine about? It is about that we choose the treatment, diagnostic methods that most probably work. We reject [methods] that are dubious, unproven, strange, those we are uncertain about, overall, those that give us doubts. So striving to follow this, in a physician, implies a striving for common sense. That is to do that which makes sense and to not do that which makes no sense. Correspondingly, it seems to me, that people with such thinking are the ones indisposed to conspiracies, to some strange ways of thinking, they, most likely, would strive to bring some normalcy into this abnormal situation. This is my version. So, they would try to help somehow, to do something they must do, that seems the right thing for them to do. (Inna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Others also aligned EBM with dissent, as Anna did when speaking about the FP collective: ‘They possess critical thinking, they read different news, they compare facts, news. The same is in medicine, you can read Up To Date and so on, and compare new research, old research’ (Anna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022). The physicians who spoke to me, thus, commonly suggested that these ways of thinking are, at least in part, what brings them together in the FP collective, as medical professionals and as citizens.

That the FP mixes specialist knowledge with dissent, and that it is driven by a sense of responsibility tied to being both a medical professional and a Russian citizen, gives us reasons to consider FP a political community. Yes, FP does not engage in activities conventionally considered political: there are no attempts to influence state decision makers, no organized protests, and no efforts to spark public debate. However, this community has been assembled in the process of searching for ways to resist, to act somehow contrary to the dominant order. FP cannot sever its attachment to the war-waging country but attempts to enact this attachment in an alternative manner, relying heavily in this enactment on digital technologies.

Being part of a larger ecology

This chapter may have given the impression that once FP had fine-tuned its work format and gained traction with drawing in sufficient number of medical professionals, no person from Ukraine ever faced problems accessing adequate healthcare in Russia. This is not the case. The FP collective strives to provide what they call ‘systemic’ assistance – that is, assistance aimed to be accessible and helpful for everyone who needs specific healthcare and cannot get it otherwise. However, there are limits to how systemic, in this sense, FP work can actually be in practice. These limits are especially notable in the case of cancer patients, for whom the FP can do very little, as Inna summarized:

The most difficult are cancer cases, because this is an interrupted chemotherapy. It is not the kind of emergency where you call for an ambulance, but also it not a situation where one can wait for a long time. This has not always ended well. The coordinators [Inna refers here to volunteers coordinating assistance provision to specific people or families] I worked with tried to transport these people to those countries where it is easier to receive this care. Overall, we assisted them in terms of trying to ease their symptoms, discussed the modes of transportation: laying down, sitting. But it all is quite sad here because without the CMI certificate it is impossible [to receive treatment], while paid services are way too expensive. (Inna, volunteer physician, interview, autumn 2022)

Ekaterina, one of the founders of FP, adds that it is not only cancer cases that are difficult to help with: ‘Difficult, there are very difficult cases, everything that has to do with prosthetics, with the consequences of wounds’ (Ekaterina, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022). She also elaborated on FP’s collaboration with other volunteers that Inna mentioned in passing:

As a rule, these people [with difficult health conditions] come here with somebody’s assistance, somebody helped them leave, somebody coordinated. Or they have relatives here who help them. And, thanks to them, these people are in a hospital. That is, there are not that many situations where we have to address these matters from scratch, although such situations do happen. (Ekaterina, FP volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Apart from highlighting that the FP collective is not capable of solving all health-related problems, Inna’s and Ekaterina’s statements serve to highlight that FP does not operate in a vacuum. Rather, this collective comprised

of physicians, organizers, technicians, social media, operational routines, and software, is itself part of a larger ecology of volunteer initiatives that formed after 24 February 2022 with a shared intention to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia. The diversity of these initiatives is a topic for the [next chapter](#). To conclude this chapter's story, suffice it to say that the existence of this larger ecology means that situations that fall through the cracks of the FP often land with other collectives who may transport people to places where the required healthcare is available or who may be able to find resources to arrange otherwise unobtainable care.

PART II

Participation

INTERMEZZO 2.1

Diversity of Participation

As stated in the previous intermezzi, I suggest understanding the work of the volunteer groups described in this book as a form of participation in politics. Apart from a particular approach to understanding politics presented in Intermezzi 1.1 and 1.2, this suggestion also relies on a particular approach to understanding participation. This intermezzo delineates this approach.

In light of the long-term dominance of state-based conceptions of politics, it is no surprise that participation has traditionally been conceived as focused on electing or influencing state officials (De Moor, 2017; Theocharis and Van Deth, 2018). This thinking is noticeable in classic definitions of participation, such as the one offered in 1972 by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, who considered participation to be ‘those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’ (Verba and Nie, 1972, p 2).

Political science theorists working on participation have never denied that citizens influence societal life in many ways, including those not aimed at the state. The problem of the diversity of sources of influence has been made manageable, though, by drawing a widely accepted boundary between activities that target the state and those that do not. Activities that target the state have been termed ‘political’ participation and subjected to extensive scholarly scrutiny, including long-term comparative studies to diagnose the state of democracy in different countries. Activities that influence collective life in other ways have been termed ‘civic’ or ‘non-political’ participation, and largely excluded from maps of political action (Verba et al, 1995; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005; Ekman and Amnå, 2012).

A turning point occurred around the 2000s, triggered by heated debates about the supposedly declining rates of political participation (Putnam, 2001; Dalton, 2008). Some scholars considered trends such as the decline in voter turnout and party memberships to be signs of creeping citizen apathy and disengagement, signalling the deterioration of democracy (Blais et al, 2004; Whiteley, 2012). Other scholars, however, claimed that this bleak picture is a

result of analytical myopia caused by inadequate conceptions of participation, rather than a reliable reflection of societal dynamics (Fox, 2014; Van Deth, 2014). Due to this myopia, they argued, we miss a variety of politically significant non-institutionalized, creative, even individualized acts that blossom outside established political avenues. It could well be that citizens frustrated with their inability to impact official political arenas are increasingly turning to such acts, which, contrary to pessimistic interpretations, is actually indicative of the vibrancy of democracy.

Concerns about diagnosing the health of democracy in different societies correctly: – are people withdrawing from politics? Are they increasingly engaging in politics but on their own terms? – have inspired considerable analytical effort to redefine participation and delineate its boundaries. One popular trope in political science has been the identification of new modes of participation that recently sprang to life (Theocharis and Van Deth, 2018). Their emergence has been stimulated by technoscientific advances and the novel risks, uncertainties, and concerns associated with these advances. In the words of the authors of a recent review article ‘a rich stream of research has since applied the political participation concept to unconventional political acts, such as protesting, and even various forms of civic engagement that are not obviously political in nature’ (Ruess et al, 2023, p 1497). Apart from protest, the most discussed recent additions to the ranks of participation proper include political consumerism, which refers to boycotts or ‘buycotts’ of certain products (Stolle et al, 2005; Copeland, 2014); lifestyle politics, which focuses on individuals’ everyday life choices (De Moor, 2017; Theocharis et al, 2021); and, with the rise of digitalization, online participation (Gibson et al, 2005; Oser et al, 2013; Lutz et al, 2014). As these ‘new’ modes are added to the ‘old’ modes of political participation, participation appears to be diversifying and expanding beyond formal political institutions.

If we start from a notion of politics as comprising all kinds of tasks involved in the continuous composition of a common world (see Intermezzi 1.1 and 1.2), we would also notice a diversity of ways employed to participate but the picture would be somewhat different. Instead of participation only recently beginning its expansion beyond the conventional confines of formal politics under the pressure of external shifts in the organization of societal life, we would see continuous and shifting co-existence of different interrelated participatory activities that adopt varying formats and degrees of contentiousness, explicitness, and orientation towards the state (Buchi and Neresini, 2008; Lezaun et al, 2016; Braun and Könninger, 2018). For instance, Chilvers et al (2021) show that in the UK, the issue of energy transitions has generated engagements as diverse as protests, participatory dance and performance, the formation of energy cooperatives, everyday energy-conscious practices such as heating and commuting, media

engagement, and government-sponsored consultations and behaviour-change initiatives. Some of these engagements are local, novel, and state-based (for example public consultations on offshore wind projects organized by relevant authorities). Others traverse national borders, have decades-long histories, and take a conflictual stance towards governments (for example anti-nuclear-power movements). Still others focus squarely on the life of specific communities and the attainment of some degree of energy autonomy (for example community energy initiatives and maker collectives).

In this picture, we see a continuous reshuffling of diverse and widely distributed forms of participation, rather than a progressive expansion of participation beyond its state-focused forms. We might also notice that it can be fruitful to study participation, just as politics more broadly (see Intermezzi 1.1 and 1.2), by starting from situations that form around specific issues of collective concern. Starting from situations offers the opportunity to pursue an open-ended enquiry that traces the antagonistic commitments of those who strive for different futures, as in the earlier example of energy transitions. This lens brings into focus the diversity of interrelated ways in which they attempt to bring their various commitments to bear on how matters of collective concern are articulated and addressed. In other words, starting from situations enables the taking stock of issue-specific ecologies of participation, including, perhaps, forms of participation that are rare or even unique to the issue in question and avoiding being locked on more familiar forms.

There are two further implications of switching an analytical vantage point on participation along these lines. First, by decentring the state, its officials, and their decisions, the idea of issue-based interrelations of diverse participatory forms renders the distinction between political and civic participation, already questioned by now within political science, irrelevant. Strictly speaking, even the addition of the qualifier ‘political’ to participation becomes meaningless since contributions to composing a common world cannot be non-political. Consequently, in this book I do not add ‘in politics’ each time I mention participation because it would be redundant but this is what is meant.

Second, the decentring of the state is important for studying participation in non-democratic situations. This is not to say that governmental institutions are unimportant. Rather, it is to say that understanding how participation occurs when it is unwelcome by powerful state actors can be aided by considering issue-based interrelations of diverse participatory forms. Such a consideration might enable appreciating otherwise barely visible, fleeting, and disguised practices employed by those uninvited and silenced to still affect issues of their concern. For example, in countries of the Eastern Bloc dominated by the Soviet Union, governments tightly controlled public expressions, so political action effecting changes in spheres of gender and

sexuality took place without presenting public demands, instead adopting intimate, everyday forms within private spaces (Gradszkova et al, 2020). In this regard, the story told in this book is about hiding and disguising or, in other words, de-publicizing public participation in an explicitly non-democratic situation.

INTERMEZZO 2.2

Digital Technologies and Participation

The participatory activities of the volunteer initiatives described in this book are mediated by digital technologies. This intermezzo explores the question of what the emergence of the Internet, social media, mobile apps, and other things digital has meant for participation.

Political science scholarship has reflected extensively on this topic, focusing among others, on two key points: (i) is participation that involves digital technologies really different from non-digital forms of participation?, and (ii) is it really participation? (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014). The first question quite quickly received a broadly accepted answer: it can be. Early reflections on the first question started from distinguishing online participatory activities that mirror more familiar offline ones, such as donating money to a campaign or signing a petition, albeit often proceeding at greater speed, with lower costs and a wider reach. It was proposed that as such these activities can be understood as ‘digitally supported participation’, since they appear to be facilitating pre-existent or ‘traditional’ participation forms. It was then possible to differentiate digitally supported participation from ‘digitally enabled participation’ (Earl and Kimport, 2011), a term that refers to novel types of participatory activities, which are impossible to perform without digital technologies. Often cited examples of such activities include following a public figure on social media and including a political message in one’s profile picture.

The making of this distinction prepared the stage for political scientists to reflect on the second question, about whether or not certain activities that involve digital technologies can be viewed as genuine participation. Although digitally supported participation was left out of consideration as nobody contested the participatory character of activities it facilitates, the appraisal of digitally enabled participation has given rise to a protracted debate. Sharing a post, pressing the ‘like’ button a couple of times are simply too easy to be genuine participation, some scholars argued (Morozov, 2009).

They suggested that such actions are much more effective in making people feel good about themselves than in engendering any kind of meaningful political action.

Others, however, countered that acts dismissively termed ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ have been unduly marginalized in political science scholarship on participation. These acts might look easy, or ‘thin’, when compared with, for example, the organization of coordinated protests, but often this is because they are considered in isolation. Posting a personal opinion on a social network, looking for news online, using a specific hashtag – all of these actions, when carried out collectively, have been shown to contribute to exerting pressure on powerful organizations, to impact the agendas of the mainstream media, and to serve as a pathway to further action, including the proverbial protests (Koc-Michalska et al, 2016). Proponents of this view argue that it is misguided to ask whether an isolated digital action, such as pressing the ‘like’ button, is participation in politics, because the increased connectivity afforded by digital technologies makes such doings more active and collective than they seem when considered in isolation (Theocharis, 2015).

Gradually, a consensus emerged that what has been referred to as digital participation or, more precisely, digitally enabled participation can, indeed, be considered genuine participation. This consensus has inspired the emergence of a popular research genre of assembling a nationally representative sample of individuals, offering them a list of discrete digital-media-based activities, such as liking, reposting, and reporting content, and asking them which of the activities listed, if any, they have done during a specified period of time and, sometimes, why. Studies in this genre have provided valuable insights by indicating just how widespread these activities are and allowing multi-country comparisons (Calenda and Meijer, 2009; Theocharis et al, 2021).

Yet another body of critical scholarship that emerged at the intersection of political science and digital studies has questioned the extent to which this style of research is actually capable of grasping the dynamics and impacts of participation that utilizes digital technologies. To understand what the arrival of digital technologies has meant for participation, these scholars argue, it is necessary to switch from studying individuals and their discrete ‘clicks’ to studying networks of connections and their dynamics.

The need to do so has been famously stressed by Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) who argued that digital technologies in the form of platforms and applications take on ‘the role of established political organizations’, by bringing together previously disparate actors and mediating their concerted activities. They offer the example of a network that rapidly formed around the theme ‘We are the 99%’. This easily sharable and appropriatable theme emerged from the US Occupy protests in 2011 and travelled the world, spreading through the sharing of images and personal

stories on social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, X (then Twitter), and Tumblr. The political action engendered by this network spanned both online and offline, with online communication and coordination extending into and feeding from activities ‘on the ground’, as the Occupy protests spread from New York to more than 80 countries within the space of a month. Bennett and Segerberg call this type of action ‘connective’ and stress that its decentred, open-ended operation hinges on digital technologies. With radically reduced communication costs and readily spreadable easy-to-personalize themes, it is often much easier to join connective action networks than to participate in more demanding organization-led initiatives. Such networks, consequently, can scale up very rapidly. Bennett and Segerberg argue that connective action networks are flexible organizations of a new kind, ‘enabling coordinated adjustments and rapid action aimed at often shifting political targets, even crossing geographic and temporal boundaries in the process’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p 753).

The debate discussed earlier had been largely revolving around the apparent lack of impact such participation has and was dissipated by studies that have shown that the impact is considerable when one looks at networked connections rather than individual ‘clicks’. Yet one more point of criticism directed at digital participation needs to be mentioned. It pertains to the quality of digital participation, and conveys disappointment that the proliferation of digital technologies has not produced anything even remotely resembling what Jurgen Habermas famously conceptualized as the public sphere (Habermas et al, 1974). Early Internet studies drew inspiration from the expectation that the Internet would provide space and possibilities for exactly the kind of free, rational, and open public debate that Habermas saw as foundational for a vibrant public sphere (Gimmler, 2001; Trenz, 2009). But it quickly became clear that digitalization was not going to give birth to an agora – universally accessible, inclusive, and populated with citizens engaged in dispassionate discussions of the common good (Habermas, 2022). Not only uneven access to the Internet and other digital technologies turned out to be to blame, but also the commercialization of online communication, online information overload, and the polarization most noticeable on social media platforms such as Facebook (Sunstein, 2018; Jeppesen et al, 2022). An extensive body of research into social media has documented the emergence of what has been called ‘echo chambers’, with people increasingly being exposed to and engaging only with views similar to their own or with opposing views reduced to simplified or distorted caricatures. Consequently, groupings that hold opposing views appear to be drifting further apart from each other, with social media use hardening their differences.

Still, assessing the role of digital technologies for participation strictly by measuring digital participation against the Habermasian ideal risks overlooking the other manifestations of publics (Marres, 2015; Birkbak,

2016). To return to the question raised at the beginning of this intermezzo – what has the arrival of digital technologies meant for participation? – we can note that aside from the new forms of divisiveness there are also new opportunities to form easier, faster, and wider connections. These opportunities facilitate the formation of dispersed and flexible participatory collectives around issues of concern. The increased digital connectivity may not necessarily facilitate open and rational deliberation, but it may still facilitate the work of addressing public issues in other ways, perhaps more mundane and affective.

As the story told in this book suggests, although digital technologies have not solved the problems of participation, they have not doomed it either. Rather, they have introduced novel dynamics that enable, both new (and sometimes extreme) ways of being together and ways of being apart. In this sense, the story told in this book is about the resulting intense interplay of solidarity and divisiveness as it unfolds alongside the digitally mediated efforts of wartime volunteers in Russia.

CHAPTER 2

A New Ecology of Volunteer Initiatives: Participating by Other Means

#Task from coordinator. A family from [city in the occupied Ukrainian territory] is now in [village in a Russian region close to the Ukrainian border]. Husband, wife, child, and an immobile grandmother of 90 years old. They need food and also the grandmother needs adult diapers, size XL. If anyone is willing to assist, send me a PM [10:04]

This message was posted in October 2022, in an open Telegram chat with close to 10,000 members at the time. I came across this chat in April 2022, and it became my first point of contact with the vast ecology of volunteer initiatives newly emerged in Russia following 24 February 2022.

The sequence of actions that occurred after I read the message gives a sense of how this ecology operates. I sent a personal message to the author, let us call her Amina, around one and a half hours after she posted:

- Me: Hi! Is assistance for the family in [village in a Russian region close to the Ukrainian border] still needed? [11:44]
- Amina: Hello, yes [11:45]
- Me: How should it be organized? Is there delivery or is it better to just transfer money? [11:46]
- Amina: We don't transfer money. There is Ozon [large online store with delivery service], unfortunately this is the only thing present there. [11:49]
- Amina: Look, there are several people who volunteered to contribute financially. But I need somebody who would make the order. I do not have time. Can you [11:49]

- Me: yes, I can do it in the evening. Will sit down at 9 and order everything [11:50]
- Amina: ok. Then I send everyone willing to contribute financially to you? [11:51]
- Me: ok. I also need a pickup point address and food preferences. Will report back in the evening [11:52]
- Amina: Sugar
Tea
Vegetable oil
Rice
Buckwheat
Pasta – different kinds
Some cookies for the child
Canned fish and meat
If there is a possibility and there are some funds left, some personal hygiene and household cleaning products can be added. [12:09]

Meanwhile, Amina shared my Telegram username with everyone who wanted to chip in and suggested that they contact me directly. I received messages from four people one after another:

Hello! I would like to contribute a bit to support the family with a child and grandma [12:58]

Hi, Olga. I am ready to participate in buying products and diapers for the family from [city in the occupied Ukrainian territory]. Where should I transfer [the money]? [13:10]

Hi, my name is [name]. Can I transfer money for diapers to you? [13:27]

Olga, hi! I can transfer money for diapers to be sent to [the village] [13:28]

I gave all of them my phone number to use as an identifier for transferring money to my bank account. In the evening, I opened the Ozon website. With my own and the others' contributions, I was able to order everything Amina had requested and more. After the order was placed, I messaged everyone who had contributed with a screenshot of the order. I sent the screenshot to Amina as well, along with barcodes the recipients would need to collect the packages from their pickup point. Amina passed the barcodes to the family, who over the next few days would collect several packages of supplies.

This brief episode demonstrates several traits, which, as I show further on, are characteristic of the operation of the diverse volunteer initiatives which

together form what can be called an ecology. The first trait is connectivity. I get in touch with Amina; four other people get in touch with me; we cooperate and end up remotely arranging the delivery of several packages to a family. We have never met or heard of one another, and none of us knows where the others are based. We know the name of the village where the recipients are temporarily located, but – apart from Amina, who has more information about the family – nothing else. We are not in physical proximity to one another (or if we are, then this is unknown and irrelevant), yet we are connected and we are doing something together. Our connection and cooperation happen in a matter of minutes, which leads to the second trait: instantaneity. I exchange just a couple of phrases with Amina, and the financial contributions of others have already arrived in my bank account. I make an online order without leaving my desk, and immediately everyone involved is notified that the task is complete, and pickup information is forwarded to the recipients.

Although our cooperation seems entirely spontaneous, it is also organized: recipients of the packages that I ordered had followed a prescribed route to request assistance; Amina is the person designated to manage the assistance provision; there is an established Telegram chat with a large membership, where Amina can easily find resources; and she is going to follow up with the family and work to assist with other needs as well. The organization, however, is not too fixed. Formally it does not exist, as there is no legal entity, no registered name or a designated leader, and no hierarchical chain of command, nor even a clear boundary separating the initiative's volunteers from others: I am just a person who wants to donate money, but suddenly I find myself coordinating other people's donations and their use. So, we can say that the organization is fluid. It is also largely hidden, because all that is visible to most people is the chat and the tasks posted there, while everything else, including how the requests arrive and are processed, is not. Therefore, in addition to connectivity and instantaneity, fluid and largely invisible organization is the third characteristic of the volunteer initiative's ecology. Importantly, all three characteristics are digitally mediated, with Telegram being central to the mode of operation (and participation) thus shaped.

This is not to say that every single volunteer initiative operates in an equally digitally connective, instantaneous, and flexibly organized way. The work formats and practices of different initiatives vary considerably and there are initiatives for whom digital technologies are not as central. However, digitally mediated connectivity, instantaneity, and flexible, partly hidden organization come to the fore if the focus is on how grassroots attempts to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia

function overall. Or, in more analytical terms, these characteristics come to the fore if the focus is on how some members of the public in Russia attempt to still affect the matter of their collective concern – their unbearable and undeniable implication in starting a war – despite being explicitly uninvited from doing so; how volunteering becomes a means of participating.

Emergence of three different initiatives

Overall, it seems that a typical volunteer is a person with a smartphone and a couple of dozens of endlessly pinging chats.

Author's fieldnotes, autumn 2022

To explore the ecology of volunteer initiatives and the modes of public participation that it produces, in this section I shall introduce three initiatives, all of which emerged soon after 24 February 2022. These initiatives are not the only ones in existence; there are many others. Those included here, though, together with the FP described in the [previous chapter](#), provide a good vantage point for delineating the diversity of the entire ecology, because they are very different in their scale, focus, and modus operandi. Considering three initiatives side by side also allows us to trace the overarching logics that are discernible across the ecosystem's operation.

On the Move

On the Move is the largest volunteer initiative among those described in this book, and, almost certainly, among its kind. It began with a small group of acquaintances living in Russia, mostly women, mostly with kids. At the end of March 2022, on realizing that fleeing the war, people from Ukraine sometimes found themselves in Russia, they started to think together about how they could assist. One of them, Natalia, created a Telegram chat to host the discussion. I will call this chat 'Unite'. At that stage it was unclear how the group would make contact with people from Ukraine, or how they would find out where the refugees were and what was needed, or how they would self-organize. Chat participants started searching for and exchanging information, and began systematizing useful information in the form of shareable instructions and lists, for example a list of charities that offer help to refugees. The lengthiest was an instruction for leaving Russia for the EU, which was continuously updated to reflect new details about routes, costs, and sources of support. Unite members attempted to keep a record of the different kinds of help that individual volunteers, both within and outside the group, were willing to provide, by creating a Google form that anyone interested in providing assistance could complete. Almost immediately,

members of the group came across several families from Ukraine in Russia who were known either to one of the participants or to their friends. The group attempted to assist these families, mostly by collecting clothing and other essential items.

As the Unite chat was open, a link to join it as well as links to the newly created instructions, lists, and forms, began being forwarded from person to person beyond the initial chat participants and being posted on other social media platforms. In a matter of days, the chat grew beyond the initial small group of acquaintances to several hundred members who were mostly strangers to one another. Inevitably, the question arose of how to connect those offering assistance with those requesting it, without publicly sharing personal information. To address this, three new Telegram chats were created, around a week after the original Unite chat was created. These new chats would later become the heart of On the Move. While the initial chat aimed to connect those eager to provide help with each other, the new chats aimed to connect people from Ukraine in Russia with those who wanted to help. The new chats were arranged based on three different scenarios: (i) On the Move A is for those in transit to the EU via city A, who can benefit from assistance with accommodation, food, and transportation in city A; (ii) On the Move B is for those in transit to the EU via city B, who can benefit from assistance in city B; and (iii) Standing By is for those staying in Russia for the time being. All three were created as open chats, and the link to join was forwarded to all of the relevant contacts of the Unite group chat members, in an effort to reach those they intended to support.

Suddenly, the chats On the Move A and On the Move B started growing very quickly, mostly due to people located in cities A and B joining. Already on the day these chats were created, messages were continuously posted there, such as these messages in On the Move B:

- Person 1: I can provide food and necessary stuff, pay for taxi, can bring food to the train or bus. Probably can do something else, I just do not know yet what exactly) [18:40]
- Person 2: Hi! I live in city B. I can help with anything [19:03]
- Person 3: Hello, I live in city B, can help with food, clothes, pack necessary things to go, transport to a train, deliver something, pay for a taxi [19:09]
- Person 3: + there is a spare room (can accommodate 2 people). There is a dog at home [19:15]
- Person 4: We can accommodate 2 people (queen size bed) in a spare room, city centre, not far away from the railway and bus stations. Will provide everything necessary. We do not have a car, but can order a taxi [19:24]

Soon after midnight, the first request for assistance arrived in On the Move B from a woman, whom I have given the pseudonym Slava. I now include a lengthy quotation from the chat to illustrate how chaotic the initial attempts to assist were, and to provide a contrast with the ordered operation that subsequently emerged:

- Slava: Hello, my family and I arrive to city B around 1–2 PM, and at 10 PM we take a bus to [EU city]. Can anyone meet and host us for this time and then help getting to the bus station? [00:34]
- Volunteer 1: you did not post the date ☺ tomorrow? [00:36]
- Volunteer 2: You can stay with us at our home. But I do not have a car, only public transport [00:41]
- Slava: already today [00:43]
- Volunteer 3: I can bring you to the bus station [00:52]
- Volunteer 4
[in response to
Volunteer 2]: which district do they need to go? I can order a taxi from the station to the address, only Slava would need to be contactable so that she can be connected to the driver. And how many people, are there kids who need booster seats? [00:57]
- Volunteer 2
[in response to
Volunteer 4]: [the name of the district] [01:01]
- Volunteer 4: Slava, if you decide to go to Volunteer 2/anywhere else by taxi, please contact me, we will then agree where to send a taxi for you [01:06]
- Volunteer 5: Come to me) I am in the centre, not far away from the bus station, [street name]. How are you arriving to city B? by train? [01:30]
- Volunteer 5: If you decide to come, pm me [01:31]
- Volunteer 5: I do not know if I should report, but I agreed with Slava that she and her family will stay with me today until their bus to [EU city]. I hope all goes well) [08:40]
- Volunteer 4: of course it is necessary to report. So that others know they don't need to stand by and to not worry for the people. Thank you. [08:49]

Chat members began to explore ways of structuring the assistance provision, as it became clear that otherwise '[i]n a couple of days the chat will turn into an endless stream of messages where it is impossible to find anything', as one volunteer wrote in On the Move B. Initially, the options for structuring the

operation were proposed directly in the chats. These included the creation of a website, with a form to register requests and the types of assistance that volunteers offer; the introduction of volunteer monitors, who would check the chats for requests and log each request in a shared table that is regularly reviewed by other volunteers, who would mark the requests they take on; and a Telegram bot that would automatically collect requests and post them in a separate Telegram channel (a channel is different from a chat, mainly in that it is less suitable for discussions and used more for broadcasting updates), with those ready to assist leaving a comment under specific posts. The central consideration was safety: how to protect people from Ukraine from fraudsters and traffickers, and to protect volunteers from the police, who might become suspicious of the volunteers' activities.

The suggested options for structuring the operation were then discussed by a smaller group of personally acquainted people either involved in the Unite chat or known to somebody from this initial group, including several experts invited to help with the technical set-up. As a result, around two weeks after the initial formation of the Unite chat, an initiative now collectively called On the Move (although it also provides assistance to those not in transit) came to comprise the following: a Telegram bot for receiving requests; bot operators for communicating with request authors; online tables for recording requests and the progress towards addressing them, accessible only to a limited number of volunteers; coordinators for fully coordinating assistance to specific individuals and families; and thousands of volunteers who take on discrete tasks handed out by the coordinators.

The bot operator and coordinator roles have become central to the On the Move initiative. Involvement of bot operators turned out to be necessary because the diversity of the situations and needs of those requesting assistance prevented the standardization and automation of request collection. When a request for assistance is sent via bot, an operator will ask the author a variety of questions to understand better ways to assist with a specific case, and direct the request accordingly. A coordinator, as an announcement posted by Natalia, the creator of the Unite chat, explained, is:

a person who takes on a specific task from the table (= request from one family) and brings this family from the Russian border in Taganrog-Belgorod (or from the moment the request is made) to the border with Estonia (or Latvia/Finland). This [person] is the 'single window', the main contact for the person who needs assistance. ... Coordinators do not have to do things themselves – like providing accommodation, providing transfer etc. But they must learn what the person requesting help needs specifically, find those [volunteers] who would perform these tasks, and further oversee the process so that everyone finds each other, and everything connects.

Those who were ready to be coordinators were asked to fill in a dedicated form, and were allowed to coordinate (including having access to all internal data and processes) only if they were known personally to somebody from the initial group or after a lengthy check and interview. Subsequently, coordinators came to specialize either in assisting those who were leaving Russia, or those who were staying for the time being. Amina, whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, was a coordinator for the latter group. Her message with the task I responded to was posted in On the Move B, along with multiple other tasks by other coordinators searching for those who would meet, host, deliver packages, order necessities, and fund services for people from Ukraine in Russia, and often posting the tasks across all three chats.

Over the course of several more days, a donations-sourced fund for buying travel tickets was established; new specialized chats supporting the operations of the initiative emerged, such as chats for car owners who take on transportation tasks forwarded to them by coordinators; an internal knowledge database began to be assembled, with helpful information for assisting in different situations; and detailed instructions and safety rules for volunteers were developed, including a rule, strictly enforced by moderators, to avoid discussing anything unrelated to assistance provision in the three open chats. This rapid growth and extensive self-organization came as a surprise to Natalia and her friends who joined her in the initial Unite chat. They did not foresee their little group becoming the seed that, planted in the digital environment of Telegram chats and Google forms, would produce a network with thousands of volunteers working together. Two and a half weeks after she created the Unite chat, Natalia posted the following message:

!! ATTENTION!!

This group was initially created for me and a couple dozen of my friends who really wanted to help those who suffer because of ★ [the war] in Ukraine, but, being in Russia, did not know what to do.

We were searching for families moved to Russia, to support them, searching for different organizations collecting necessities and money for refugees in Russia and, rarely, for passing humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian territories.

Suddenly a huge community emerged of those who want and are ready to help. And two main directions for help grew:

- We help those Ukrainians who are in Russia but would like to go to Europe

For this there are groups in city A and city B [links to open Telegram chats On the Move A and On the Move B]

- And a group for supporting those who are staying in Russia [link to open Telegram chat Standing By]

This present chat, in fact, receives messages suitable for all three chats above, and is not used for its initial purpose.

Therefore, to stop this chaos, I CLOSE this chat.

After closing the Unite chat, Natalia remained involved with On the Move for several months, and subsequently withdrew from it. As the self-assembled volunteer collective had by then settled into its distributed and non-hierarchical way of operating, it was able to proceed with its work unaffected by this withdrawal and has remained the gravity centre of the entire ecology of new volunteer initiatives.

Another City chat

A chat of volunteers based in a city I have called, for anonymization purposes, Another City, came into existence at the beginning of May 2022. In contrast to the very widely operating and dispersed On the Move initiative, the Another City chat focuses, as is clear from its name, on one particular city and its surroundings. Another City is a relatively large urban centre, somewhat remote from the capital. It is located some distance from the main transit routes usually taken by people from Ukraine moving through Russia towards the EU. Therefore, like other volunteer communities situated away from the transit routes, volunteers who came together in Another City chat rarely deal with transportation-related tasks that the On the Move volunteers typically take on. What Another City volunteers deal with mostly is local PVR (centre for temporary accommodation).

I now describe the emergence of the Another City volunteer initiative through a story told to me by Sergey, one of the central members of the initiative and a fellow social scientist, in response to my question: 'How did you become a volunteer?' Sergey, like most of the volunteers I spoke to, began his answer with Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022:

So, the invasion started. And during the first week there was blood-curdling anger, and panic, and attempts to understand what to do. Spontaneous chats with designer acquaintances about urgently producing anti-war posters to be printed in a friendly printshop that would not be afraid to print them. Then pressure started, and manhunts, and arrests at protests. And I, I guess, did not have enough courage to go where the arrests were intense. And I just did not know what to do. (Sergey, Another City volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

What happened next was a (by now familiar in this story) haphazard digitally mediated search for allies and ways to act. Sergey's friend told him about a newly emerged group, which I shall refer to as People For Peace, which was

looking for members in different regions across Russia. Anyone interested could fill in a form and join, subject to receiving verification, which meant being vouched for by someone known to the organizers. Together with 80 other people who passed verification, Sergey was invited to a new regional Telegram chat:

This was a chaotic chat, where people would say hello, which city are you from, do you have a PVR there or not? And in a week, the Another City chat separated out from this one, created by an acquaintance of mine who just invited everyone from Another City there. A small chat of 6 people originally. This was already May, the beginning of May. And then through different acquaintances in education, in art, in other [spheres], I started following all kinds of volunteer initiatives to see who does what and to understand what can and what cannot be done. I was following some Voronezh fund, because in Voronezh, in Belgorod, in Kursk, there is a particular overload. I was looking at who does what in Rostov, I started following chats of Orthodox parishes that do it [provide assistance to refugees]. At some point, from these chats and from the large chats like On the Move and Standing By, I started inviting people [located] in Another City to join [our local initiative]. (Sergey, Another City volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

A small, closed Telegram chat of six people from Another City, whose ranks were expanded by others recruited through the Telegram chats of other volunteer initiatives, became the first building block of the Another City volunteer group. This building block was a central element of the initiative, to which other elements, as Sergey describes further, were gradually added. Hence, the Another City initiative remains commonly known simply as ‘the Another City chat’ despite it being much more than a single chat. Apart from searching for other locals to join the initiative, Sergey and others were searching for people from Ukraine in and around their city. They concentrated on finding out whether their region had a PVR, and if so where the PVR was located. Initially their search was unsuccessful, with all of their calls and visits to local state organizations, such as the local branch of the Ministry of Social Protection, resulting in the answer that no information was available. In the end, the volunteers managed to locate the PVR entirely through a chance encounter:

Yet our first access [to a PVR] came through one general volunteer chat where a woman, a volunteer from [a town in Crimea], wrote that a family is travelling through Another City, please meet them, they will then proceed somewhere further. So, through this contact [we eventually located the PVR]. Well, because ours was the world of

non-professional volunteers who, wide-eyed, jump from one Telegram chat to another, I asked my neighbour to go to the station and meet the family. The volunteer did not give us each other's contacts and we, actually, did not meet them. For a whole day we were thinking, this was the simplest task – to meet people at the station and host them in an apartment and we failed to perform it. And we are worthless as volunteers. But then she [the volunteer from Crimea] did connect us. And it turned out that the family was directed to the PVR near Another City. And this is how we got access to it. That is, we used not just an unofficial channel but an absolutely random contact through a third chat. Very ... I do not know, like a spider flying on a leaf. (Sergey, Another City volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

After locating each other and the people from Ukraine in their area, the Another City chat volunteers still had to figure out exactly what they could do and how. As Sergey's story indicates, this was not a straightforward, self-evident process, as the group's work and its organization turned out to be quite different from what they had imagined:

And we started working. Important note, due to those regional chats [Sergey refers here to the regional chats created by People For Peace], we all had originally a romantic plan. The way we imagined our meeting with the displaced people was very naïve. Like you arrive to a PVR, you hold a bag with pasta and clean underwear in your hands, and a beautiful leaflet from Helping To Leave [a non-governmental organization that helps evacuate Ukrainians to safety]. You turn up and say: 'Leave Russia, it is the aggressor country.' And the refugee replies: 'Cool, thank you very much, I'm leaving right now.' And it all turned out to be not like this, to put it mildly. ... So, by the end of May, this imaginary of a quick success had dissolved. Instead, excruciating processes started, like turning our chat into a public chat, writing down rules, writing down a system of processing requests, of receiving requests, of assistance provision principles.

I'm not sure, perhaps this is totally my personal experience, but I had a feeling that for the first time in my life things that drove me crazy in the corporate world, like mission, aims, objectives – everything that within a corporate structure seemed entirely pointless to me, here turned out to be super useful. Like, there is a need for some minimal rules by which all of this can work, and then you can bring in new people who would not have to ask 700,000 clarification questions. During the first month of work I offered colleagues to work with Airtable ... and it works. We created a knowledge database, where volunteer roles are described. If you are a driver volunteer, then you

do this. If you want to be a coordinator [working with] a family, this involves such and such responsibilities. In essence we assembled an internal Wikipedia and started working. (Sergey, Another City volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

The initial Telegram chat became public, as Sergey described it, or open, to use standard Telegram terminology. Several hundred more people who wanted to help joined. Some group members became coordinators, managing the provision of assistance to specific families, and posting tasks in the chat for other volunteers to take on. The people from Ukraine in the Another City region started their own Telegram chat, which is monitored by several volunteers who scan it for requests the initiative can take on. Finally, there is a separate closed chat, created in Signal – a messaging app widely considered to be one of the most secure apps of its kind – for key organizers, including Sergey, where decisions regarding the organization of the work are made: ‘It somehow spontaneously happened that the quorum is five. When five people approve of something, some initiative, by a brief call or in writing, then we implement it in the big public chat’ (Sergey, Another City volunteer, interview, summer 2022).

Apart from these elements, assembling the Another City volunteer initiative included establishing a small warehouse to store essential supplies such as clothes and nappies; initiating contacts with legal consultants and medical professionals; inventing ways to provide psychological assistance despite the PVR director’s prohibition against these services; exploring mechanisms for collecting donations; and establishing routines for visits to the PVR. Today, Another City chat volunteers continue to respond to requests from those staying in the local PVR, as well as from those who have left the PVR but remain in the region for the time being. The assistance provided includes buying medicines and providing other necessary items, arranging medical and psychological help, helping to recover documents, and putting Ukrainians in contact with those who are able to organize their departure to the EU.

Vasilisa

Vasilisa is one of those volunteers who have become a very active part in the new ecology without strictly being a member of any group initiatives such as On the Move, Another City chat, or For Patients described earlier. At first, when she learned about such initiatives, Vasilisa joined their chats and would take on tasks here and there. But the work she has ended up doing took shape largely outside these chats, and in a rather incidental way:

Everything started from a message that came not through this chat [On the Move B] but from a friend of mine who wrote me: ‘A

psychologist is urgently needed for a nine-year-old girl from [a city in the occupied territory]. Her parents perished. She is here, at her relatives' place, and her condition is bad.' ... I have many connections in the medical field, and with psychologists too, these are interrelated areas. I quickly put the word out. It was late in the evening but I found enough very high quality contacts and passed them on. They connected, it all worked. Then I thought, I have collected a lot of contacts, others might need them too. So, I wrote in the chat [On the Move B]: hey people, I found many psychologists who are ready to work with refugees, how should I reasonably utilize them? (Vasilisa, individual volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Following this post, Vasilisa, who lives in city B, was contacted by volunteers who attempted to provide assistance to Ukrainians in the PVR located outside the city. Vasilisa worked with the volunteers to attempt to negotiate permission for psychologists' visits, but the PVR administration was adamantly against allowing psychologists access, perhaps out of a wish to limit the residents' contact with outsiders. This was also the case with the PVR in Another City. Vasilisa began arranging psychological care in city B for Ukrainians in transit to the EU, and for those who stayed for the time being. She recruited around ten volunteer psychologists who were ready to work on a long-term basis, and connected them to the necessary resources to create a stable arrangement for psychological care provision:

One psychological centre in the city centre gave us space for free. And, since April [2022], psychological consultations have been continuously held. In person. Plus, sometimes there are requests for online [consultations]. Except online, in the case of refugees, is more complicated. Because it is not suitable for everyone, there are many elderly [for example]. Also, often they [refugees] have issues with privacy, with [Internet] connection. So, in-person appointments are ideal. Some refugees do work with a psychologist online, those who are in the PVR. ... And some come for consultations because we have a free hostel for them, this was also organized, so they come. (Vasilisa, individual volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Vasilisa has not stopped there. Being exempt from the need to create rules and routines necessary for the operation of a group, she has remained flexible in what she does and for whom. Gradually she started providing assistance to people from Ukraine with serious health problems. This development is not surprising, given Vasilisa's connections to the medical world, but its origins are just as incidental as those of Vasilisa's psychological care initiative:

Originally, I was contacted by one volunteer [who knows me] via six handshakes. She said: '[Vasilisa], this is urgent, we have a young man arriving, he has a shell fragment injury to his eye. There, in [a city in the occupied territory], where he was taken to a hospital, he was told that his eye cannot be saved. He is asking for help from an ophthalmologist, you know, to take a look.' And I started going to doctors with him. I am not a doctor, but through working in this field I have an idea of how it all works: which conditions should be taken to which doctors, how to talk to doctors, how to check prescription list – meaning to check for homeopathic remedies or something like that [included in there]. This was the first case. Then another came. Then my friends started giving me money to use for this purpose. (Vasilisa, individual volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

As the aforementioned quotation shows, the fact that Vasilisa is an individual volunteer does not mean that she works alone. She is often asked for assistance by other volunteers, often those from large groups. The young man with the eye injury, for example, was transiting to the EU with help from On the Move, and a member of the initiative reached out to Vasilisa. People who know about Vasilisa's activities and wish to support her send money to pay for medical services and other expenses, such as taxi rides, medicines, and wheelchairs. Some people offer to take on some of the tasks involved in her work, such as accompanying a person on a doctor's visit:

[In city B] we have a couple, a priest, and his wife, and they organized a system of medical care for refugees. ... So, the volume [of cases] that I am capable of taking on myself, I take, and we transfer some tasks to each other, support each other and so on. I arrange appointments with physicians, pay for diagnostic procedures, do all of this. Today I will bring a woman to the neurologist and cardiologist. Tomorrow, I've asked a volunteer to accompany a 3-month-old baby on a doctor's visit. ... And then there are two young men who came from a neuropsychiatric residential care home somewhere in the occupied territories. One guy is in a wheelchair, the other one is taking care of him. I don't know the latter's diagnosis, but it seems to me that he ended up in that care home largely for social reasons. And he's spent almost his entire life there. So that chat of ours [Vasilisa created a small closed group chat where she invited everyone helping out with assisting the two men] – we are sending them [both men] to Germany, but we're trying to perform diagnostic and treatment work here to a maximum level, as they have no medical documentation, it all was left behind, so we are doing all that – so now in the chat there are 15 people: driver volunteers, one brings them to one doctor,

another [person accompanies them] to another doctor. All of this is planned, tasks are divided. I made appointments for the neurologist, the psychiatrist, for an MRI scan, for the ophthalmologist. And so on. This morning, they [the men] were taken to do blood work. (Vasilisa, individual volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

Thus, Vasilisa's work is collective, but it differs in some ways from the collective work of the explicitly group-based volunteer initiatives. First, Vasilisa does not have a sophisticated digital infrastructure for coordinating actions. She keeps track of what she does without the need to make it accessible and actionable for dozens of others. Instead, she involves others personally and on an ad hoc basis to assist her with specific discrete tasks, or to work together across the entire process of providing assistance in certain cases, such as providing the necessary care for an elderly, emaciated, and immobile woman with diabetes being transported from occupied Ukrainian territory to the EU. In cases that involve many tasks and complicated logistics, Vasilisa is likely to start or to be invited to a small closed group Telegram chat enabling those involved in the case to communicate with each other. Requests for Vasilisa's assistance come to her directly, via a phone call or a personal message on Telegram. Her contact details are passed on by those whom she previously assisted to others who might need her help. Many volunteers are also aware of Vasilisa's work, and often contact her requesting help with medically challenging cases, especially in the city B area.

Second, Vasilisa does not strictly adhere to her specialization in arranging medical and psychological care provision; rather, she will do everything that she feels is necessary for a given case, which she is capable of figuring out how to do. Among other things, she has participated in finding homes for pets from occupied Ukrainian territories who have lost their owners, and has co-coordinated several large-scale efforts to deliver essential supplies, such as insulin, to people who remain without such necessities in the occupied territories. Vasilisa does this work by calling on, and being called on by, a network of contacts, many of whom are individual volunteers like herself. For instance, she knows those who can reliably arrange transportation across dangerous occupied territories, while the latter know that they can trust Vasilisa to assist their passengers when they arrive in Russia. She knows volunteer groups abroad who can receive and make suitable arrangements for Ukrainians with health problems whom she cared for in Russia, and these foreign groups know that they can rely on Vasilisa to provide necessary support to those who they are expecting to meet across the Russia-EU border.

Finally, Vasilisa is in close contact with several small-scale and individual volunteers in her area, including the couple whom she mentioned in her earlier quote. They keep close track of each other's activities, brainstorm ways

to approach particularly difficult situations and ways to do more, and help one another in their daily efforts. In the absence of established procedures supported by a common digitally mediated work structure, Vasilisa and those she cooperates with simply call on one another directly. Following a stream of messages like ‘this is the situation, can you help with [a task]?’; and ‘this is what needs to be done, any idea how?’, they come together in situation-specific, impromptu teams, which later are reassembled to respond to yet another situation.

Settling in different styles of work

The descriptions of FP, On the Move, Another City chat, and Vasilisa indicate that volunteer initiatives that aim to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia are very diverse. Giving a thorough account of the diversity of what they do and how, especially given that there are many more such initiatives beyond the four introduced here, may seem an insurmountable task. To make it more manageable, I introduce three spectrums of difference that position volunteer initiatives vis-à-vis each other and allow us to examine what exactly distinguishes their styles of work and how distinctions between them emerge. I propose to take stock of the diversity of the volunteer initiatives’ ecology by positioning the initiatives along three spectrums: (i) a spectrum of orientations, ranging from striving to be systematic to striving to be responsive; (ii) a spectrum of emphases, ranging from adhering to maintaining orderliness to cultivating spontaneity; and (iii) a spectrum of degrees of visibility, ranging from going public to striving to remain hidden.

Being systematic versus being responsive

The first spectrum of differences along which diverse volunteer initiatives may be positioned is oriented towards being systematic at one end, and being responsive at the other. Sooner or later, both groups and individual volunteers are faced with the necessity of making a choice regarding where on this spectrum they stand. It is not always that they are ready to make this choice explicitly, especially at the beginning of their volunteer work. But making it is inevitable. Specifically, the choice is between, on the one hand, providing a similar kind of assistance to every recipient in an effort to support as many people as possible, that is, being systematic; and, on the other hand, always adapting to the specific needs and situations of those who request assistance, in an effort to make the assistance as comprehensive as possible, that is, being responsive. Both orientations work, and both have disadvantages. In the case of orientation towards being systematic, certain people and situations might not fit the standard framework for assistance provision, or fall through its cracks. In the case of orientation towards being

responsive, it is much more difficult to provide similarly comprehensive assistance to everyone who needs it, creating an uneven assistance provision.

An example of a group with a clear orientation towards being systematic is On the Move. Being systematic is achieved by adhering to rules regarding what the initiative does and does not do. For instance, On the Move volunteers will assist with transporting Ukrainians across Russia to the EU, but they will not assist with transporting people who wish to return to the occupied Ukrainian territories regardless of the reasons behind such return. For Ukrainians who stay in Russia for the time being, On the Move volunteers provide essentials, such as food, clothes, and hygiene and cleaning products, but they do not help with relocations within Russia, or with receiving state benefits and local documents. These rules delineate the scope and type of assistance provided, with the aim of providing an approximate equality between all those requesting assistance and uniformity of how they are assisted regardless of which volunteer takes on their request.

An example of orientation towards being responsive is Vasilisa. She does not have a standard package of support for those who leave and those who stay or explicit rules she adheres to in all cases. Every request that she takes on is addressed individually and what exactly is done or, sometimes, not done depends on the specificities on the situation in question. She is adaptable in what she does; for example, as mentioned previously, in addition to arranging the provision of psychological care and coordinating assistance for those with serious health problems, Vasilisa has become involved in the work of pet rescue in the occupied territories, and contributes to many other efforts where she feels she has something useful to offer. Similarly, a priest and his wife, the couple Vasilisa mentioned, also exemplify orientation towards being responsive. This orientation is evident in how they take on requests of almost any kind that reach them. For instance, in March 2024 they helped with, among others, arranging eye surgery for a displaced woman from Ukraine who was rapidly losing her sight; urgently supplying hygiene and medical essentials for immobile residents in several care homes in the occupied territories; and collecting money to cover a large fine that a woman from central Russia with four children was ordered to pay for ‘discrediting the Russian army’ by calling for the war to stop.

Distinguishing between these two orientations does not imply that every initiative can be classified as strictly systematic or strictly responsive. Rather, most initiatives tend to strive to be *more* systematic or *more* responsive, rarely becoming either one fully. Even On the Move, with its strong orientation towards being systematic, still does not completely rule out the possibility of providing assistance beyond their delineated scope in exceptional cases. A degree of responsiveness is preserved, among others, by the open nature of the On the Move chats, where people from Ukraine can post requests that go beyond the scope of the initiative’s usual assistance and ask if anybody

is willing and able to respond. For example, On the Move volunteers do not usually provide carpets, but a mother staying in cold temporary accommodation may ask for a carpet directly in the chats, so that her child can play on the floor. It is likely that somebody from the chat will individually address this request. A degree of responsiveness is also enabled by the coordinators' freedom to seek of their own accord additional resources for assisting those whose situations they take on. For instance, there is a rule that only economy-class train tickets can be purchased using the funds collected by the initiative. However, when a coordinator is arranging a route for a family with many pets, or for elderly people receiving care that requires privacy, the coordinator may purchase higher-class tickets for them to travel in their own train compartment. The coordinator can then ask participants of the open chats to cover the difference between the cost of the economy-class tickets and the higher-class tickets. Finally, On the Move might announce separate calls for donations to cover non-standard types of assistance approved by an inner group of its most active volunteers. One such fundraising announcement in early 2024 began with the following words:

We are collecting [the sum] for funerals. For more than two years we have been transporting refugees. And sometimes we ran out of time on the way. People pass away far from the home they left behind, before they can reach their new one. There is nobody to help with funerals apart from volunteers...

Furthermore, there are initiatives that manage to strike a balance somewhere around the middle of this spectrum, such as FP (see [Chapter 1](#)). FP combines being systematic with being responsive through its system of receiving and sorting requests into those that can be dealt with in a standardized manner, through providing online consultations and referrals to the public healthcare system, and those that cannot. The latter type of requests are fewer, and often stem from situations of inadequately managed serious health conditions such as epilepsy, from the inability of locally available healthcare professionals to provide a diagnosis, and from treatment inaccessibility in cases that require rapid initiation of treatment. To respond to such requests, FP organizers call on their personal networks to source the relevant expertise and to arrange access to specialized facilities. FP might cooperate with other volunteer initiatives to secure funds for these exceptional actions. Thus, while working systematically with most requests, FP abandons this orientation in the case of requests where adhering to the system would amount to a failure to provide help.

The choice of orientation towards being systematic or towards being responsive is, to some extent, related to the size of the initiative. Larger initiatives could be more likely to strive to align its participants through

establishing uniform principles of assistance provision. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. For instance, Another City chat is much smaller than On the Move, but this group is just as oriented towards doing its work in a systematic manner. The choice of orientation also does not necessarily stem directly from the focus of an initiative. To illustrate this point, I shall briefly mention one more volunteer initiative dedicated to healthcare assistance: let us call it Medical Support (MS). MS operated from May 2022 until January 2023, and was run by physicians from several, mostly private, clinics located in the same city in southern Russia. MS was a rare example of an almost extreme orientation towards being systematic, despite its small size. People from Ukraine in Russia were invited for online medical consultations held by physicians with particular specializations during specific time slots. It was possible to sign up for a consultation only by following the prescribed procedure in Telegram. If a person requested assistance in an area of medical specialization not represented among the group physicians, then MS would decline the request. They were also unable to help those who lack the technical skills to sign up for a consultation, and those who need more than an online consultation.

Comparing MS with FP, an initiative with a similar focus on healthcare assistance but working with greater responsiveness despite being significantly larger, we can see that the size and the focus of the volunteer initiatives do not necessarily determine their styles of work. Rather, an orientation towards being systematic or responsive is a choice, which, along with several other key choices discussed later on, initiatives settle into in the process of trying to align the situations they face with their capabilities to assist.

Being orderly versus being spontaneous

Another spectrum of differences along which diverse volunteer initiatives may be positioned ranges from maintaining orderliness to cultivating spontaneity. The previous section on being systematic and being responsive discussed externally oriented rules that concern the scope and extent of assistance provided. This section discusses arrangements that concern how the initiatives are set up and function internally.

Creating and maintaining a degree of order is often inevitable when those who have not already formed a well-functioning team are trying to collaborate. This is especially the case when collaboration continues over a prolonged period of time. When like-minded people come together spontaneously to carry out a time-bound action, it might be possible to decide who does what as they go along. This was the case initially with the Another City chat; however, once it became clear that the need for assistance was ongoing, the chat members turned to thinking about how to organize

their continuous operation, to ensure adequate inflow of resources, including more volunteers, and to logically connect those who might need assistance with those who provide assistance. That is, they turned to emphasize the creation and maintenance of orderliness of their internal processes. At the other end of the spectrum from orderliness is spontaneity, which in this context refers to an extemporaneous coming and acting together that are not stabilized by tools and organized processes.

The emergence of an emphasis on maintaining orderliness at the expense of spontaneity can be observed in the evolution of FP. The initiative was very spontaneous at the outset; patients and caregivers would post their questions directly in the open chat, which was self-regulating, and all available volunteer physicians could weigh in with advice and follow-up questions, which sometimes led to disagreements about the best course of action. Vladimir, Ekaterina, and others, including Telegram chat bot and online tables, instilled order in the initiative through clearly dividing roles, organizing the back office, creating standard procedures for processing requests, and partly automating connecting patients and caregivers with those able to address their requests, that is, bot operators, physicians, or the FP organizers, depending on the complexity of the request. This way of ordering the initiative's work has been carefully maintained ever since, allowing for an efficient and steady operation. Many other volunteer initiatives turned to emphasize maintaining orderliness too, but not all. There remain initiatives that lean heavily towards spontaneity, such as a few large, open chats that function without a connection to a specific region; individual volunteers who offer their assistance on an ad hoc basis; and some regional initiatives to assist Ukrainians located in a specific PVR.

At the same time, while FP along with Another City chat and multiple other initiatives emphasize adherence to orderliness, only a few of them reject spontaneity entirely as it is not only chaos and inefficiency that spontaneity accords to volunteer initiatives. Spontaneity also appears to allow for eagerness, engagement, and the living, unabating core of the volunteer initiatives – the readiness of many people to participate and persist. That is, the choice with regards to the spectrum of differences discussed in this section is not necessarily about embracing strictly one or the other. The choice can be understood as being more about finding a balance between orderliness and spontaneity suitable for a specific initiative.

A search for such balance can be traced in activities of many initiatives. For example, following a protracted internal debate, On the Move volunteers decided against prohibiting requests for assistance to Ukrainians who remain in Russia in the chats dedicated to assisting those in transit, and vice versa. Furthermore, it was decided that requests can be posted by anyone, not solely coordinators, so long as the request deals directly with situations of people from Ukraine in Russia. This allowance for flexibility between

the chat streams inevitably creates extra work for moderators, who must cross-check and respond to repeat postings across multiple chats, and makes the chats more difficult for members to navigate. Separating the chats for those leaving and those staying in a stricter way and only posting requests that originally came through the On the Move bot and were taken on by a coordinator who, then, does the posting, would lower the workload and decrease the chaos that appears to take hold of the chats occasionally. As one volunteer complained to On the Move's admins: 'I do not understand why, for example, On the Move B chat is filled with just everything! ... Very strange things sometimes'. This conversation took place in winter 2023 in a separate chat created for On the Move members to share their ideas of how the initiative could be improved. Counterarguments included that '[it] looks in this case like a sign that there is life here' and 'a chat where every word is a violation of some rule would lose some of its helping members'. The group's inner circle of organizers settled on a compromise by carrying out stricter moderation and regularly publishing reminders to submit requests via On the Move bot, without rigidly separating the chats. They explained their balancing act in the following way: '[w]e are very afraid to lose "the heart of the chats"', therefore we are not prepared to undertake radical measures. We need people in chats' – this concern, variously formulated, drives On the Move efforts to strike a balance between being orderly as a means to work efficiently and being spontaneous as a means to keep people engaged and the collective action going.

Finally, there are some initiatives that lean heavily in favour of strict orderliness. In contrast to On the Move and many others, the initiatives of this kind are not dependent on broad membership, and are therefore exempt from the need to make allowances for preserving spontaneity that feeds collective engagement. An already mentioned example is the now-disbanded MS, which comprised a small group of personally acquainted physicians and did not aim to recruit more volunteers. Only the physician-organizers of MS could post messages; messages followed a predefined format that conveyed information about when and which physician would hold consultation hours and how to sign up for a consultation; and everyone else could only request clarification under the posts. There was no space for broadening the community of engaged volunteers, which, again, was not something the core group sought to do. Therefore, adhering solely to maintaining orderliness was a suitable option for this initiative.

The aforementioned examples indicate that the search for a style of work that allows them to steadily provide assistance drives volunteer initiatives to choose a position on the spectrum from adhering to orderliness to cultivating spontaneity. While some initiatives end up assuming positions close to either one of the spectrum's extremes, most seek to variously balance maintaining order to achieve efficiency and preserving spontaneity

to facilitate engagement from a broad circle of volunteers. Determining the right balance between orderliness and spontaneity is not usually arrived at in an instant. Rather, an initiative gradually settles into it in the process of exploring ways of operating. Nor is it cast in stone: initiatives may become more orderly or spontaneous as the need to adjust their work style arises as a result of changes in the resources they rely on, the emergence of more external constraints that have a bearing on what they can do in relative safety, or shifts in the nature of the requests that reach them.

Being public versus being hidden

The last spectrum of differences I shall discuss here relates to the choice of degree of visibility with which volunteer initiatives operate, ranging from going public to staying hidden. A choice regarding a degree of visibility is tied closely to the safety of volunteers and of those whom they work to assist, in the context of increasingly repressive Russian laws. Widespread practice of charging anyone who takes a critical stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine with 'discrediting Russian armed forces' and 'spreading misinformation' enabled by the new laws that first came into force in March 2022, places the initiatives explored in this and the [previous chapter](#) in a precarious position. Considering that simply using the term 'war' can be interpreted as a criminal offence according to these censorship laws, to continue their work volunteers need to exercise extreme caution.

Technically, the activities undertaken by volunteer initiatives to provide support to Ukrainians in Russia are not, for the time being, illegal. Many volunteers themselves stress this point, by describing FP's activities as the optimization of healthcare provision, for example, or describing what the Another City chat does as humanitarian aid distribution. 'Helping others is not prohibited yet' is a sentiment I have heard many times from the volunteers. At the same time, most initiatives do try to minimize publicity and avoid attracting attention, not least because while helping is not illegal there is nothing to prevent eager law enforcement officers from proclaiming these networks to be a form of anti-state activism, and prosecuting them accordingly. Staying completely hidden, however, is not a viable option for volunteer initiatives because they need to be discoverable by Ukrainians and other would-be volunteers. Furthermore, some degree of publicity may actually be protective, as it signals, as one of Another City volunteers put it, 'look, we are not hiding anything!' (Maria, interview, summer 2022) while excessive secrecy may have the opposite effect. Thus, it is an uncertain position between being public and being hidden that volunteer initiatives attempt to assume to balance these considerations.

To some extent, the position that different initiatives occupy on this spectrum is connected to how they acquire resources for their operation.

Larger initiatives, such as On the Move, mostly acquire resources internally. Thousands of volunteers connected through the group's open chats cover a huge range of tasks between themselves – meeting and hosting refugees; transporting people and belongings; sourcing and delivering supplies; and raising funds for services like taxis, mobile phone services, and care for people with complex needs. The initiative announces fundraisers from time to time to collect additional funds. These fundraisers are announced only internally, in the chats, and are normally quickly closed within a day. Thus, since its emergence, On the Move has assisted thousands of people but this work hardly leaves public traces anywhere beyond the chats themselves. Links to the chats are shared from person to person, and are not posted anywhere apart from other like-minded volunteer chats. On the Move volunteers tend to avoid communicating with journalists, and never initiate publications about their work. When the core group of On the Move wanted to recruit more volunteers, the call was published only internally in the On the Move chats, asking those already involved to bring in others whom they trust.

These measures do not make the initiative completely invisible; with some effort, open chats can still be found by anyone. At the same time, it is noticeable that on the spectrum from going public to remaining hidden, On the Move leans heavily towards remaining hidden in the sense of limiting the external reminders of its incessant activity. This positioning is enabled primarily by the significant size On the Move spontaneously grew to during the first months of its existence. Its size allows it to gather resources needed for its operation without overt public appeals. Some volunteers do argue that with overt appeals On the Move would collect more resources and would be able to do more, as they shared in conversations with me. But to date, On the Move overall has strived to remain as hidden as possible to avoid compromising the possibility to continue doing what they do.

The situation is usually different for smaller, regional initiatives such as the Another City chat. These groups rarely grow entirely spontaneously, like On the Move did, through people in search of how to disagree with the invasion finding the initiatives on their own. They also rarely attract volunteers in numbers sufficient for collecting the necessary minimum of resources internally. The story of the Another City chat is illustrative of how such smaller initiatives must strike a different balance between going public and remaining hidden. The original small group of locally based volunteers found each other through larger chats, and by extending invitations to join to trusted friends. Shortly after locating the local PVR and collecting the first rounds of requests, they realized that they were not going to be able to manage the mounting requests on their own. The group decided to publish information about the Another City chat in several local media, in order to attract more volunteers and resources. One of the members of this initial group told me: 'We discussed this among ourselves and understood

that, carefully, we must do it. ... It was already clear that it's difficult for us to collect money, that we have very large needs and very little means. In short, we had no choice' (Maria, Another City chat volunteer, interview, summer 2022). The group tried to minimize the risks of going public by agreeing with the journalists they contacted that the group must approve the articles' final wording and the timing of publication. This step brought the hoped-for results, and after the publication of carefully worded news stories with a link to the Telegram chat, several hundred new volunteers joined. Subsequently, the Another City chat has not appeared in the media regularly and has limited its visibility.

In comparison to the largest and regional volunteer initiatives, individual volunteers tend to depend the most on going public in order to secure resources to support their work. Here I refer to individual volunteers like Vasilisa who attempt to provide assistance as widely as possible. There are also individuals who assist a certain few people or families using their own resources. They too can be called individual volunteers but their work is entirely hidden, being private between themselves and the families they have a relationship with. Individual volunteers who work with many people, in contrast, actively publicize their activities as the volume of assistance they are able to provide directly depends on the amount of support other people are willing to provide to them, mostly by donating money but also by sharing their contacts, finding friendly experts, and providing access to specialized organizations. Such volunteers usually go public by sharing anonymized descriptions of the situations that the people they assist are in, and reporting on what they were able to do in specific cases on social media, for example on Facebook and/or their own Telegram channel. Choosing a high degree of visibility is a personal risk, as Vasilisa is acutely aware:

Everything must be paid for and money must be collected. I post on Facebook. I write posts about refugees, I indicate there that this is where money can be sent. Of course, I am on thin ice here, yes, I understand that at any moment some comrade major could tell me: 'so, lady, let us check how much dough you collected and what you did with it. We'll say that you spent it all on yourself.' And I have lots of different money transfers. (Vasilisa, individual volunteer, interview, summer 2022)

In an effort to avoid provoking 'the comrade major', in her Facebook posts Vasilisa sticks to describing the situations she is helping with, the routes people travel, the homes they leave behind, and their future plans. But even with careful avoidance of the words that have come to be associated with 'discrediting Russian armed forces', Vasilisa's posts vividly convey that the travel routes are heart-wrenching, that homes are destroyed, and that

refugees' prospects are dire and filled with grief, making it very clear that the author is not an ecstatic war-supporter. Despite the risks of choosing publicity, for Vasilisa and many individual volunteers, positioning themselves firmly at the 'going public' side of the spectrum of degrees of visibility is almost inevitable if they are to continue their work.

Not all volunteer initiatives fit into this simplified scheme of how a position on the spectrum of degrees of visibility is assumed, not least because of their diversity. But in one way or another all initiatives do face the choice regarding where to place themselves between being public and keeping hidden. This choice along with two other choices described here – between being systematic and being responsive and between maintaining orderliness and cultivating spontaneity – characterizes a wide diversity of the work styles different volunteer initiatives gradually settle into.

Forming an ecology and filling in gaps

Together, the multitude of volunteer initiatives with diverse work styles form a living ecology. How an initiative chooses to position itself on the three spectrums described earlier not only defines its work style but also delineates a certain 'niche' that it becomes capable of filling. No single initiative can have all these characteristics in equal measure and, correspondingly, no single initiative can assist people from Ukraine with everything while in Russia. But because there are many such initiatives, the ecology they compose together is adaptive and resilient enough to be able to address many different kinds of situations.

One example of the adaptability and resilience of the volunteer initiatives' ecology occurred early in 2024. At the centre of the situation was a horse. The horse was standing in a barn located on the left bank of the Dnipro River, so close to the fighting line that the family who owned the horse could barely leave their shelter by the barn. The family included a woman, a child, an elderly couple, and their cats and dogs; they were desperate to leave the village, but refused to abandon their horse. This is how a volunteer, let us call her Maria, who together with her volunteer driver partner, arranged their evacuation after everyone else said it was not possible, described the situation and how she became involved on her Telegram channel:

[They refused to leave because] a family member cannot be abandoned. [The family] has their own car that works, but the horse cannot be transported without a horse carrier. Volunteers from the other side cannot help [Maria refers here to Ukrainian volunteers from the right side of the Dnipro River controlled by Ukrainian forces; the left side of the river, where the horse and her family were located, was occupied by the Russian forces]. Even if you collected a million [rubles], it

would not help. ... Among us [Russian volunteers] nobody takes on such an evacuation.

And all of this arrives to me, formulated as ‘a horse needs to be evacuated from [the village]’. The first reaction by me and my partner was: ‘****, it’s only a horse that we haven’t yet tried evacuating.’ The second reaction was to refuse to help, because we feel sorry for the horse but to risk our lives only for the animal does not seem like a good idea to us. And on top of that, who would donate money for a horse while there are so many people in trouble. Difficult. Ambiguous. But then I speak to [the woman], learn the details, and our focus moves to the child. We evacuate the horse = we save the child. So we take this on. ... The next question is: ‘How on earth can a horse be transported from an active war zone!?!’

Maria, a woman in her early twenties, first set foot inside the occupied territories after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam on 6 June 2023. She travelled there alone, hoping to do something useful for the survivors of the flood. On the spot, she joined up with a group of missionaries who were transporting people from the flooded houses, and got to know the surrounding territory and some local families remaining there, leaving her phone number so that they could contact her. Afterwards, Maria started receiving various requests for assistance; she partnered with an experienced driver, opened a Telegram channel to help with collecting funds, and began delivering humanitarian aid and arranging evacuations from the occupied territories close to the front lines. Some six months and one shell shock later, the request for evacuating the family with a horse arrived.

This case is indicative of the adaptability and resilience of the volunteer ecology in several respects. First, the request arrived not from the family directly but via other volunteers. While Maria is not nearly as well-known or discoverable as the larger and regional group initiatives, volunteers across the network were able to identify her as the right person to help as the near-hopeless request for the complicated evacuation was bouncing from one initiative to another. Second, Maria and her partner succeeded in evacuating the horse and the rest of the family. They found an improvised horse carrier and prepared their car in order to tow it along the destroyed roads; they made logistical plans to accommodate the curfew, veterinary control at the Russian border and possible demands to produce documents for the horse. Seven hours after the car departed to pick up the family, Maria posted on her Telegram channel a single word: ‘alive’. Thus, while most volunteer initiatives were not capable of taking on the task, the diversity of the ecology as a whole was enough to still produce a response to the request. Third, after Maria and her driving partner had done their part, other volunteer

initiatives took over. The humans with their cats and dogs continued their journey with support from On the Move coordinators. The responsibility for the horse was handed over to an animal rescue group, whose members dealt with Russian veterinary control at the border, which demanded that the travellers return to the deadly scene they had escaped to retrieve the paperwork for the horse from a veterinary station that no longer existed. After some delay, the group managed to get the horse across the border and housed her on a farm far from the active warzone. Thus, even without stable connections and clear work algorithms linking all volunteers involved in this situation, they acted in a coordinated fashion, adapting to the situation and moving forward despite obstacles such as veterinary control and threats to life.

Beyond this specific situation, the adaptability and resilience of the volunteer initiatives' ecology is noticeable in the continuous process of what can be described as 'branching out'. Existing initiatives produce and are joined by other, more specialized initiatives that fill in the gaps and support the operation of the entire ecology. For example, On the Move has gradually become surrounded by a host of more narrowly focused initiatives, such as suitcase storage facilities and humanitarian aid warehouses. Many people from Ukraine who pass through Russia on their way to the EU turned out to need wheeled suitcases, or else face proceeding with their exhausting journeys with overflowing plastic bags and heavy backpacks holding all they have left. Soon after the emergence of On the Move, suitcase storage facilities popped up in the largest cities along the main transit routes. The facilities were opened by people who joined On the Move chats, had space in their apartments or garages where they could store the suitcases, and had time to meet people to give the suitcases to them. The suitcases are supplied by On the Move fundraisers, and by various ad hoc sources identified by the storage hosts themselves. Suitcases are provided to those travelling with the support of On the Move coordinators, and those transiting to the EU on their own. In the same large cities, and also beyond them in locations including Another City, humanitarian aid warehouses have opened for refugees to collect clothes and shoes suitable for the season, and a range of other essentials. While suitcase storage facilities usually do not have their own channels on Telegram, and a visit is arranged by contacting the hosts directly, the aid warehouses tend to open dedicated channels to hold their own fundraisers and to coordinate the arrival and distribution of supplies.

Another example of an initiative that emerged to fill the gaps left by the existing initiatives is a small group of tech-savvy volunteers who upgrade used laptops and distribute them among people from Ukraine in Russia, informing everyone about their activities via On the Move chats. These examples show the extent to which the ecology of volunteer initiatives is constantly evolving, branching out into previously unaddressed niches, and opening opportunities to provide wider assistance.

Coming back to the beginning of this chapter, all of the stories recounted here testify to the centrality of digitally mediated connectivity, instantaneity, and fluid, largely invisible organization to the operation of the volunteer ecology as a whole. This operation, of course, is crucially dependent on action on the ground: a horse carrier must be physically delivered to a village in the line of fire and then transported intact across the border with a horse inside. At the same time, we can see how on-the-ground activities are stitched together by a mesh of instant digital connections. Details of situations requiring assistance travel in minutes across a vast network of volunteer initiatives most members of which have never sat at the same table together, ‘meeting’ and getting to know one another instead by names of Telegram channels, group chats, and users. The movement of people, animals, and the remnants of their war-torn lives relies on Telegram group chats, and occasionally other social media platforms, for coordination, fundraising, and providing necessary resources. Digital technologies, including Telegram bots, Airtable, and open and closed chats, allow for the organization of this widely dispersed work. The organization is not hierarchical and does not involve rigid standard operating procedures; nonetheless it does exist, as evidenced by the steady interconnected operation of multiple initiatives with diverse work styles.

The ecology of volunteer initiatives does not only facilitate assistance provision; it also facilitates public participation. Or, rather, it would be more accurate to say that the provision of assistance to people from Ukraine by the volunteer initiatives in Russia is a way of practising public participation. These initiatives operate in a non-democratic situation, where law enforcement and security agencies have a wide array of oppressive laws and other means at their disposal to effectively crack down on attempts at explicitly contentious engagement with politics. Public participation enabled by the volunteer ecology is, consequently, largely depublicized: volunteers do not attempt to engage directly with state officials, nor to stage public debates, nor to influence media agendas with the intention of attracting attention to their cause. And yet what they do is politically significant, because their activities invoke a different version of the world. These attempts proceed quietly, by planting and cultivating an alternative version of the world, a version that is liveable for those citizens of the war-waging country who cannot reconcile such a country with themselves. That this is what the volunteers ultimately do – quietly build an alternative to the world, with a different Russia coalescing within it – is felt by many volunteers themselves too, as Vasilisa expressed on her Facebook page at the time Maria was battling for the horse’s right to cross the border with veterinary control:

‘There will be no beautiful Russia of the future,’ every second [person] writes. Ok, there won’t be, sure. But I would be quite content with a

normal Russia of the future. More precisely, it already exists, but for now it's invisible to the majority for its own safety. Right now, I observe in the chats how small fragile girls are evacuating a wounded horse from a territory under fire. Just try to imagine the logistics of this. ... In parallel they're evacuating people, including immobile, elderly people, dogs, and cats. Two days ago, the car of one of the drivers was shelled, everyone miraculously survived. But the car had to be left on the roadside, it is beyond repair. ... These people exist, there are not many of them, but they do a lot. When the dark cloud of hopelessness covers you next time, just remember: living in the same country as you are people who don't sleep and fall over backwards trying to save a wounded horse.

The volunteer initiatives' ecology discussed in this chapter enables public participation that amounts to the gradual assembling of an alternative to a dire reality; an alternative rooted in volunteer networks and the assistance activities they collectively perform daily. Crucially, the mode of endangered and depublicized public participation discerned here relies on digital technologies.

Looking even beyond this, though, it is possible to notice the existence of volunteer initiatives that work to provide assistance to people from Ukraine in Russia but are, counterintuitively, not in the least bit contentious towards the Russian state. Doing work that is similar to the work of the volunteer initiatives discussed in this book so far, and being deeply concerned with the issue of war, these other initiatives are part of the same ecology of participation. Yet they are striving for an entirely different world. The [next chapter](#) explores the work of these volunteers and the different world they are busy assembling.

PART III

Publics

INTERMEZZO 3.1

Searching for Publics

Previous intermezzi discussed politics and participation. In Intermezzi 3.1 and 3.2, I shall discuss the publics. Who are ‘the publics’? While this question has not generated debates as heated as those devoted to the state of participation, it is just as thorny. Often, explicitly or implicitly, the publics are imagined as a natural and continuously existing aggregation of autonomous individuals. Anyone who wants to know ‘what the public thinks’ about a particular topic can extract this information by using ‘technologies of elicitation’ (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007), such as opinion polls and other similar exercises. It is expected that these exercises allow tapping into pre-existing public views and preferences. Uncovered, the views and preferences can be taken into account in decision making. If the sample of those involved in an exercise is considered to be representative of a particular population, then it becomes possible to make claims about what, for example, the Dutch public thinks of current migration policies.

The proliferation of technologically complex innovations, the usage and effects of which must be regulated, has noticeably complicated the public opinion extraction process, without, however, challenging the involved imaginary of the public. It turned out that individual members of the public rarely have a ready and clearly articulable opinion on the range of topics on which their opinions are being solicited. Oftentimes, a response to a question such as ‘What do you think of pre-implantation genetic testing and how we should regulate it?’ would be ‘I don’t really know, I’ve never thought about it’. Technologies of elicitation have adapted to this challenge. Instead of tapping into already-formed public opinion, they have been reconceived as generating public opinion through inviting citizens to deliberate on select issues under controlled conditions (Voß and Amelung, 2016). The generation of public opinion through such formats as consensus conferences and citizen juries typically involves participant selection, often with elements of randomization and/or stratification based on certain sociodemographic parameters; the provision of information on the issue at hand to the selected participants; and carefully scripted deliberation guided by experts (Goodin

and Dryzek, 2006; Smith, 2009; Curato, 2021). Simply put, such formats aim to produce what the public at large would think if it was adequately informed and took sufficient time to carefully reflect on the information received (Niemeyer, 2011).

Irrespective of whether public views are considered pre-existent or generated through the deliberation processes, the public itself is still conceived as an entity that is always already there (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2016). It appears to exist continuously in the background, always available to be consulted on any matter that policy makers deem necessary. Indeed, this is the main mode of participation available to such publics: taking part in discrete and isolated events in the format of an opinion poll or consensus conference, which are ideally linked to particular decision moments. When public opinion is thus extracted and fed into policy- and decision-making processes, individuals comprising the public return to their normal private, non-political lives.

This understanding of the publics fits very well with state-focused notions of politics and participation. If, however, we decentre the state and its formal institutions by starting from political situations and tracing issue-specific ecologies of participation as discussed in previous intermezzi, we might see the publics differently. What if the publics do not exist stably and naturally ‘out there’, irrespective of societal controversies and conflicts? One radical alternative has been offered by Noortje Marres. Drawing on John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, Marres proposed that these are issues that ‘spark publics into being’: ‘Think of committed vegetarians in Europe, and globally operating agribusinesses in Kansas, who decide to stick a pig’s gene in their tomatoes’, Marres writes.

These two groupings are unlikely to share many social affiliations. ... But they are jointly implicated in the issue of genetically modified (GM) food – the vegetarians because they would be prevented from being vegetarians if they would end up eating tomatoes with pig in it, the industrial farmers because this, after all, is their business proposition. (Marres, 2005, p 214)

Here, we see actors with vastly different commitments, who, nonetheless, become inescapably related to each other through their joint yet antagonistic involvement in the issue in question. Through the process of forming and articulating the issue – What is at stake? What are the threats? – and by taking it upon themselves to settle it, they emerge as a public. Thus, instead of a public that continuously exists as a somewhat amorphous collection of autonomous individuals who can be consulted as a part of the policy-making process, an alternative imaginary emerges of a public that consists of actors jointly implicated in an issue that existing institutions have failed to

settle. Publics understood in this way do not pre-exist the issues, but rather come into being in the process of articulating and addressing them and are deeply divided by the partial irreconcilability of commitments and ways of life involved in the issue at stake.

From this analytical angle, the story told in this book is about a public that came into existence almost overnight, following the escalation of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine in February 2022. The story is about how groupings within this public, driven by the irreconcilability of their divisions, have been attempting to gravitate as far from each other as possible but remain inextricably tied to one another, unable to escape their joint implication in the issue of war.

INTERMEZZO 3.2

Publics in the Era of Digitalization

The previous chapters showed that groupings considered here have relied heavily on digital technologies, in emerging as a public while acting on the issue of their concern. This intermezzo, therefore, considers how to take digitalization into account when thinking about publics.

Most scholarly attention to the effects of digitalization has come from the field of media and communication studies. These scholars have shown how digital media challenge the traditional divide between ‘mass’ and ‘interpersonal’ communication, suggesting that the domination of one-to-many communication, that of mass media to passive audience, is a thing of the past (Schroeder, 2018). Instead, they have documented the growth of many-to-many communication in a lively terrain where mass media co-exists with user-generated content, news circulates among groups on social media platforms, and online information seeking is subject to new gatekeeping mechanisms such as search engines (Chadwick, 2017). There is no doubt that these developments are far-reaching. The question to consider, against this background, is whether these effects have changed what publics are. Do conceptualizations of publics that do not explicitly take digitalization into account, including that by Dewey, lose their relevance?

At first glance, the answer is yes. Proliferation of terms such as ‘hashtag publics’, ‘algorithmic publics’, and ‘calculated publics’ does suggest the emergence of a new kind of publics (Gillespie, 2014; Rambukkana, 2015; Bruns et al, 2016; Christin, 2020). However, there are at least two points that could challenge this conclusion. First, in digital media research the term ‘public’ is often used very liberally, while, perhaps, other terms, such as ‘audiences’, ‘communities’, or ‘groups’, might be more suitable. For example, the concept of ‘calculated publics’ has been offered to aid in scrutinizing the logics employed by the algorithms of platforms like Amazon and Facebook to anticipate the interests, preferences, and concerns of users, and construct categories such as ‘customers like you’ and ‘friends, and friends of friends’. Tarleton Gillespie, who authored the concept, emphasizes the opaqueness of these logics when he says:

When Amazon recommends a book that ‘customers like you’ bought, it is invoking and claiming to know a public with which we are invited to feel an affinity – though the population on which it bases these recommendations is not transparent, and is certainly not coterminous with its entire customer base. When Facebook offers as a privacy setting that information be seen by ‘friends, and friends of friends,’ it transforms a discrete set of users into an audience – it is a group that did not exist until that moment, and only Facebook knows its precise membership. (Gillespie, 2014, pp 188–9)

Gillespie goes on to suggest that what algorithms invoke in these ways are publics which are calculated and, thus, brought into being by the algorithms themselves. The ‘calculated publics’ concept reveals the political character of algorithms that do not merely describe, but actively prescribe certain groupings. In so doing, the concept allows us to ask crucial questions such as: ‘how do these [algorithmic] technologies, now not just technologies of evaluation but of representation, help to constitute and codify the publics they claim to measure, publics that would not otherwise exist except that the algorithm called them into existence?’ (Gillespie, 2014, p 189). At the same time, while certainly not disputing the political significance of algorithms, one could wonder whether the groups that algorithms call into existence are necessarily publics. Most approaches to defining publics, including the notion of ‘issue publics’, which I introduced in *Intermezzo 3.1*, would expect a public to be more than ‘a gathering of a crowd of people, physically or algorithmically’, as Jannie Møller Hartley and colleagues (Møller Hartley et al, 2023, p 1678) phrased it.

There is also a second point that might challenge the impression that the onset of digitalization has enabled the emergence of entirely new kinds of publics. Somewhat paradoxically, although it is commonly asserted that the online and offline realms should not be thought of as clearly separate and naturally distinct, digital studies scholarship tends to limit its investigation of publics squarely to online spaces, as illustrated by the concept of ‘hashtag publics’. This concept is mainly used to refer to ad hoc online discussion communities, the emergence of which is facilitated by the Twitter (now X) user-generated system of hashtags. This use leaves aside any extensions from and spillovers into the offline, as can be seen in the text of an already classic work on hashtag publics which are described as ‘gathering to discuss breaking news and other acute events’:

Twitter hashtags – such as #ausvotes for the 2010 and 2013 Australian elections, #londonriots for the coordination of information and political debates around the 2011 unrest in London, or #wikileaks for the controversies around Wikileaks – thus aid the formation of

ad hoc publics around specific themes and topics. They emerge from within the Twitter community – sometimes as a result of preplanning or quickly reached consensus, sometimes through protracted debate about what the appropriate hashtag for an event or topic should be (which may also lead to the formation of competing publics using different hashtags). (Bruns and Burgess, 2015, p 14)

Thus conceived, hashtag publics, or rather, topical hashtag communities, are certainly new; they did not exist before Twitter was around. But if we look at hashtags as yet another means involved in the formation of publics, and avoid limiting the existence of publics to a purely online realm, then we are unlikely to see a totally novel kind of public, nor are we necessarily forced to radically reconsider how publics come into being. The important role of Twitter hashtags in activist action and protest mobilization, including in the Occupy movement, has been well documented (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). But while X (formerly Twitter) might very well be central for connecting and coordinating, the publics that emerge around, for example, the issue of economic inequality at the heart of the Occupy movement, are not confined to X in their presence and action.

The aforementioned two points suggest that the emergence of digital technologies has not, contrary to appearances, changed the nature of publics. To a large extent, what have been presented as publics of a radically new kind in digital studies are either more akin to groups, communities, and audiences than to publics, or else refer narrowly to the online components of publics that in fact span online and offline. I do not mean to say, of course, that digitalization has changed nothing; only that an analytical approach is needed which allows us to notice changes without making sweeping conclusions or stumbling upon the online/offline dichotomy. One possible starting point for such an approach is the notion of sociomaterial collectives. It draws on the idea that action is never individual. I allow myself a lengthy quotation from Michel Callon and John Law (1997, p 97), who give the following example to illustrate this idea:

Andrew is the managing director of a very large laboratory. ... [L]et's look at some of the things that he does. For instance, he talks; he talks with subordinates. And he also gathers intelligence from outside. An example: he visits 'head office,' where they make decisions about the future of the laboratory. And, at the same time, he lobbies. So half the time he's not sitting at his desk. Indeed, he's not in the laboratory at all. He's at head office. He's negotiating. He's collaring people in the pub to bend their ears and catch the latest Whitehall gossip. Or he's in London, attending meetings in smoke-filled rooms. Comparing brands of malt whisky with the powerful in the land. He's out there 'waving the flag,' as one of his subordinates puts it.

Callon and Law proceed to question to what extent it is actually Andrew who does all these things:

Now let's try a thought experiment. Just imagine what would happen if they took away Andrew's telephone and his fax machine. If they blocked the flow of papers and reports. Imagine what would happen if they shut down the railway line to London and stopped him from using his car, so he couldn't get to the smoke-filled rooms. Then imagine, also, that his secretary were to disappear. And his room, with its conference table, its PC and electronic mail, were to vanish. (Callon and Law, 1997, p 97)

That the ability to act is distributed becomes very noticeable in this example, and furthermore, so does the fact that it is distributed between humans and nonhumans. Coming back to the publics, this is how publics can be thought of too: as sociomaterial collectives comprising interrelated humans and nonhumans, such as devices, procedures, documents, settings, and, more recently, digital technologies.

If we concede that it is not individual humans, nor even groups of humans, who act as publics, but rather sociomaterial collectives, then we can analytically approach publics in the era of digitalization without essentializing the digital, either as a sort of publics or as a realm. Thinking of publics as sociomaterial collectives allows us to notice that the emergence of digital technologies did not mark the first time that technologies and other nonhuman entities have become involved in the formation of publics. At the same time, digital technologies are specific. For example, Anastasia Powell shows how a political strategy of voicing experiences of sexual violence, long established within feminist activism, deepened its reach with the involvement of social media. Simultaneously, the involvement of social media facilitated the transformation of this strategy: enacted in the networked digital environment it has produced new meanings and practices of informal justice for victim-survivors of rape (Powell, 2015). Using the idea of publics as sociomaterial collectives as a starting point, then, enables us to explore the changes digital technologies do introduce in the kinds of relations between human and nonhuman members of publics and in the abilities that derive from these relations. This is one of the things this book does: it takes the public (a deeply divided public as the [next chapter](#) shows) that came into being with the intensification of war in February 2022 as consisting of sociomaterial collectives that involve, among others, digital technologies, such as Telegram, and traces how the collectives thus composed manage to act.

CHAPTER 3

‘Patriotic’ Initiatives and Divided Publics

One morning I was doing my fieldwork, which, for this book, involved more of screen staring than actually going anywhere. I was searching for volunteer initiatives in different Russian regions, in an attempt to delineate the volunteer initiatives’ landscape. That particular morning, I was focusing on a region close to the border with Ukraine (called here the Border Region). I had already collected several links I saw earlier being given to those searching for assistance for people from Ukraine in the Border Region. I opened the first link on my list. It led me to an open Telegram group chat I call here The Circle. The chat description simply read: ‘The main Border Region chat for refugee assistance. Here help can be requested or offered. We also invite volunteers and concerned citizens.’

Thinking that this is clearly a relevant initiative for my research, I proceeded to read the pinned posts, where rules and important information can usually be found. Indeed, the first pinned post offered a list of ways to help: by donating money to Ivan, the chat’s creator; by buying essential supplies from a provided list and delivering them to The Circle’s warehouse or sending them by post to one of the pickup points close to The Circle’s warehouse; and by reading the chat and responding directly to the requests posted there. The post ended with: ‘ the good will prevail’.

From the rest of the pinned posts, it became clear that the assistance provided by The Circle consists mostly of distributing packages with food and other necessities purchased by the organizers using donated funds, and by others who want to help. To receive an aid package, one needs to fill in a Google form; individuals and families who fill in the form are added to an electronic waiting list to receive their packages in turn. The Circle also assists by providing information, which the initiative has collected and systematized in the form of instructions and lists. I opened a pinned post where links to all such instructions and lists were presented together, grouped into categories such as ‘Staying in Russia’ (including information

about registering one's place of residence and where to translate documents), 'Applying for Russian citizenship', 'Daily life' (including information about healthcare and currency exchange), 'Car' (including information on how to obtain a Russian driving licence), and 'Assistance' (including lists of various sources of assistance in the Border Region). Scanning the post, I noted that the information was mostly of the kind relevant for Ukrainians staying in Russia, rather than those in transit, which I initially interpreted as a regional specificity. Since the Border Region is close to the battle lines, many people who used to live in what is now a warzone flee there. Ukrainians arriving in the Border Region might be physically unwell and unable to go further; they might be grieving and wanting to stay as close to where they used to live as possible, unable to give up on their destroyed homes. I found a brief report indicating that, in October 2022, The Circle distributed more than 200 aid packages, with 1,154 requests still on the waiting list. I took these numbers to support my interpretation that The Circle assists a high concentration of extremely disoriented people who have fled a combat area. The initiative must be trying to equip refugees with information for sorting out immediate and urgent issues, I thought somewhat contrary to the scope of The Circle's instructions, allowing people to catch their breath before deciding what to do next.

I proceeded to read The Circle chat. I saw posts with requests and offers to provide items such as drying racks, blankets, children's clothes, and strollers. Families searching for places to stay in the Border Region often enquired about houses in the countryside, suitable for accommodating their pets. Some people posted information about job vacancies, mostly for cleaners, cashiers, car mechanics, and gardeners. The Circle posted invitations to join the group as volunteers, to help moderate the chat, raise funds, and work in the warehouse. There were pictures posted of boxes filled with preserves, cereals, vegetable oil, and all kinds of food with a long shelf life. After about an hour, I stopped reading and started scrolling, noting the topics of the messages posted: photos of winter boots on offer; a single mother needs size 4 nappies; people asking about conditions in the local PVR, and so on. A short exchange from the end of October 2022 caught my eye:

- Nina: Peace to everyone 🙏
 I want to express my gratitude to Ivan for responding and helping!
 Ivan, you helped us a lot and my father also thanks you! [21:02]
- Ivan: May god grant you peaceful sky!!! We are one people. We will survive the difficult times and all will be well. And then we will join at one table. There will be Ukrainian dumplings. And Ossetian pies. And Belorussian potato pancakes. And

Russian mushrooms. There will be everything. The country is big. But the people are one!!! [21:08]

I stared at the screen. Ivan is the creator of The Circle chat, often referred to as ‘the head’ of the initiative. Nina and Ivan both mention peace, but Ivan goes on to elaborate that apparently the condition for peace is the unification of the Ukrainians, as well as of Belarusians, Ossetians, and various unnamed others, with Russians in one single country. I pressed on Ivan’s post to look at his user profile, and saw a picture of a middle-aged man with stubble, wearing camouflage gear with a stripe in the colours of the Russian flag sewn on.

After idling for several minutes, my mind finally went back to work. I was too used to volunteers who assist Ukrainian people in Russia, feeling devastated by the attack of their own country on its neighbour. For them assistance is resistance they attempt to mount to the world where Russia continues to cause death and destruction. Volunteers from the initiatives discussed in the previous chapters did tell me about ‘others’ – variously called patriotic volunteers, Z-volunteers, and state volunteers – who also work to provide assistance, but in pursuit of entirely different aims. The two do not work together, I was told. Further down in The Circle chat, I found a vivid illustration of the reason for this in Ivan’s response to someone’s post asking about how to find volunteers who transport people from Ukraine to the EU:

We do not transport [people], and we do not welcome this decision. The EU wages a war against everything slavic. Meaning against you and us!! We are one people. And we must overcome and stop this together. Put the west in its place and build our peaceful life!!

I offer you to stay in a PVR. It will be much easier for you.

Reading Ivan’s responses to Nina and to the question about moving to the EU, I realized what kind of initiative The Circle is. It seemed I could no longer postpone my exploration of the patriotic volunteer initiatives.

Starting with The Circle, I turned my focus to those volunteers who assist people from Ukraine in Russia feeling that they are aiding their fellow countrymen, who have suffered in the process of ‘being freed’. For these volunteers, providing assistance is definitely not resistance; it is their contribution to the common cause of reuniting a people whom they believe are meant to be one. Looking at this kind of volunteer initiative alongside those described in the previous chapters makes it possible to gauge the depth of the rift tearing apart the public that emerged around the issue of war. Members of this public are tied together by their ‘Russianness’, which, however, fills some with guilt and shame, compelling them to do something to counteract the misery that their country has inflicted, and

others with pride and eagerness to welcome people they feel they are being rightfully reunited with, following a painful but necessary intervention by their country. Peculiarly, they pursue their polar opposite aims by doing more or less the same thing: providing assistance to people from Ukraine while in Russia, and together forming an ecology of diversely organized participatory initiatives.

Importantly, by considering initiatives from this chapter together with the volunteer initiatives from the previous ones, we can notice the role of digital technologies. This role is central but ambivalent in that digital technologies are simultaneously connective and divisive. Digital technologies allow those who share concerns to learn about and connect with each other, to form adaptive and resilient networks, and to coordinate collective action, often on a significant scale. Through their cooperation, volunteers find ever more in common with each other, as they share practices, responsibilities, grief, humour, spoken and unspoken rules, communication channels, and hopes. They become more connected, more together. At the same time as their association strengthens, so too does their separation from those who they are unable to act together with, with whom there appears to be nothing in common left. In other words, the digitally mediated volunteer initiatives described in this book emerged as a public sparked into being by the issue of war; they are implicated in this issue jointly, but so antagonistically that no collective resolution of any kind is possible.

Going public

This chapter discusses two volunteer initiatives that I call 'patriotic' – a popular self-descriptor for these groups, and a term also used by the anti-war volunteers to designate the pro-war initiatives. I focus on The Circle and a group I call here the Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova (the Assistance Centre), both working in the Border Region, which is one of the locations where patriotic volunteers assisting people from Ukraine are most present. I chose these particular initiatives because both remain active at the time of writing, and because they are sufficiently different from one another that putting them side by side offers some insight into the divergences and convergences in the patriotic initiatives' modes of operation. The resulting picture is not symmetrical to that of the volunteer initiatives discussed in the previous chapters, partly because there are fewer patriotic initiatives and, as will soon become clear, their activities are less networked. Therefore, I do not use the same axes introduced in the [previous chapter](#) to analyse the operations of the patriotic initiatives but have rather identify three traits that characterize their operations and strongly distinguish them from volunteer initiatives pursuing resistance. Despite these differences, patriotic initiatives' volunteering work can also be seen as public participation, just as unscripted

from above as the work of the previously introduced initiatives, although much less endangered (if at all) than the work of their resistance counterparts.

The first characteristic that is noticeable in the operation of the patriotic initiatives is a firm orientation towards publicity. An episode or, rather, a string of episodes, illustrative of this orientation involves both, The Circle and the Assistance Centre. After my initial exploration of The Circle's chat, I began collecting media publications about the initiative. The top hit on my search results was a link to a regional online news outlet, where a lengthy article was published about a conflict between Ivan, the head of The Circle, and Daria, the head of the Assistance Centre. This article, and others media materials I subsequently discovered, indicated that in the course of the conflict both sides worked hard to publicly present and disseminate their own point of view, and had ended up threatening to take each other to court.

The conflict's latest episode reported in the first article I found took place in November 2023, when Daria was shortlisted for the We Are Together award for initiatives that benefit society. The winners receive their awards directly from Vladimir Putin. The description of Daria's initiative on the award's website refers to it as a 'project', and states:

From the beginning of the Special Military Operation [the Russian government's official term for the war in Ukraine], the Border Region has received many refugees. They have lost homes, property, health, and loved ones. They arrive with small bags and sometimes with nothing at all.

The majority [of the refugees] are elderly people. They did not know how to obtain documents to receive an official status in Russia, what rights they have, or what social benefits and support measures they are entitled to. Consequently, they felt down and lonely.

Volunteers from the Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova came to their assistance. They organized a humanitarian aid collection point where concerned Border Region citizens brought clothes, dishes, medicines, and hygiene items. Volunteers developed an effective system of request collection via chat bot in Telegram. In response to each request, essential supplies were delivered and help with finding accommodation, completing paperwork, finding employment, and resolving issues with healthcare and children's education was provided. In total, 42,000 relocated people have received assistance [so far].

Refugees took everything [we offered] and thanked us tearfully. They received not only humanitarian aid, but also support, compassion, and understanding of their grief and experiences. Philanthropy became something beyond volunteering for us, it became constant round the clock work. 'It is a call of the soul and heart,' shared the project's head [Daria Fedorova].

The project involves 38 Assistance Centre volunteers – physicians, teachers, designers, and psychologists who did not remain indifferent to the other's misfortunes. In the future, they will continue helping elderly people and plan to open a club for them.

When the news of Daria's shortlisting was announced in the Assistance Centre's open group chat on Telegram and published in the local media, Ivan wrote a lengthy post in The Circle's chat. It began by Ivan explaining why he thought it was necessary for him to react to this news:

Let's get acquainted The most acclaimed, most active, most honest, and most everything volunteer of the Border Region. This is proven by a letter of recognition given to DF (Daria Fedorova) by the heads of the region.

But this is not enough. This year, DF decided to nominate herself for the role of the main volunteer in all of Russia in the competition We Are Together. And my inner rebel could not stay quiet. I imagined how madame DF is honoured in the Kremlin. How the country's leaders give her commendations and presents, shake her hand. Don't know if there are grants or some other valuable effects. But there will be something material.

But has anyone among those going through [the award] applications thought about who exactly is climbing the Olympus, tearing off her nails? I think that they don't even realize how they thus [by giving the award to Daria Fedorova] can discredit the very respected and significant people of our state.

Ivan proceeded to accuse Daria of a number of things, including 'ideological flexibility', expressed through the 'negation of the national symbols' (apparently Daria told journalists that her group does not 'stick any symbols on themselves' when helping people); having connections to foreign agents and untrustworthy organizations such as Doctors Without Borders; the non-transparent use of collected funds; and creating a cult-like atmosphere in the team. Ivan ended his list of accusations by assuring readers that he would have paid no attention to what Daria is doing if not for the possibility of her becoming more connected to the Russian state through the award:

But when madame Daria Fedorova from the Border Region nominates herself for the position of the best of the best in the volunteer movement, and thereby can discredit the top figures of the state, I am not ready to overlook this. War is ongoing!

Moreover, I am against such events [awards ceremonies]. There are many worthy volunteers among us, and it is not appropriate to single out a few of them.

So, I call to cancel this event altogether. And I urge people to think hard before voting for such individuals. Daria Fedorova is certainly not together with us.

Ivan's post featured in several Telegram news channels and made its way to the regional media. Journalists asked Daria to comment, and she responded that everything in Ivan's libellous post was driven by his envy. In an interview with a local journalist, Daria said: 'This situation has seriously impacted me and my nervous system. I went to a psychologist, to a polyclinic, and for the first time in 20 years I have begun having health issues.'

She elaborated that Ivan's accusations affected not only her personally but also the operations of her volunteer initiative. The stream of donations was drying up, and she feared that the Assistance Centre's chances of receiving state subsidies might decrease:

Most people who see this article [Ivan's post about Daria], would not thoroughly look into the facts. They see such information and, possibly, would simply stop helping and say nothing more about this. I see a significant decrease in donations and, correspondingly, we will not be able to continue helping those we help. ... Also, autumn is the time for writing applications for grants and subsidies, and the different projects we are submitting for 2024 may be denied support because of these publications.

At the end of the interview, Daria addressed Ivan directly, countering his claims by stating that it is he who discredits the entire volunteer movement:

You accuse me of some thefts and misdeeds, how about you stand by my side and do something. Where have you been this entire time? Why have you not been around? Why do you appear only when you see my successes and achievements? Stand up and show what you've done, travel my path. Come to [one of the occupied territories] with me, let's deliver humanitarian aid under shelling a couple of times. A question arises as to who here is the real spy and who discredits the volunteer movement and to what end?

In her interviews and in the Assistance Centre's Telegram chat, Daria shared that she felt endangered: 'I think that this can be dangerous for me. I have not received direct threats. Nobody called me, nobody told me anything, but, knowing these people, knowing their essence, I understand that at any moment something might happen to me.'

This episode in the conflict between Ivan and Daria was preceded by other episodes that involved struggles for ownership of The Circle's chat (Daria

was initially a member of this group); over the control of warehouses of humanitarian aid; over access to a bank account with corporate donations; and over credit attribution in the media. All of these episodes were widely reported and discussed in open Telegram chats and regional media, and any one of them might suffice to illustrate the patriotic initiatives' orientation towards publicity. One way in which the patriotic initiatives are unlike the largely anonymous, horizontally organized contentious initiatives is that they are represented by personalities whose names, faces, and characters are well-known. These personalities, and the initiatives they represent, constantly strive to be in the spotlight, using a wide variety of means and occasions to gain public attention and court the media, in contrast to the reserved and minimalist approach of the contentious initiatives. As the aforementioned episode highlights, the patriotic initiatives not only showcase their own activities, but also engage in public discussions and confrontations concerning credit attribution and the legitimacy and credibility of other volunteer initiatives operating in the same space. This, again, contrasts with the approach of the contentious initiatives, who strive to limit the visible evidence of their operations and do not engage with those initiatives which they feel to be incompatible with their own, denouncing openly only fraudsters attempting to profit from vulnerable people by posing as volunteers.

A final point to note is that the patriotic initiatives, the members of which may be quick to disagree with each other on many things, are firmly united in how they position themselves vis-à-vis the state. What distinguishes them from the initiatives pursuing resistance is not just an amicable attitude towards the state; it is the ambition to be an extension of the state, by interpreting and propagating its aims and reach as the next section shows.

Extending the state

In this section I introduce in more detail the Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova. The story and mode of operation of Daria's Centre illustrate the second trait of the patriotic volunteer initiatives: their ambition to extend the Russian state. Different initiatives of this kind may realize this ambition differently but irrespectively of particularities, its presence is defining. Let us take a look at what extending the state through assistance provision may entail in practice.

Extending the state within Russia

Daria Fedorova moved to the Border Region with her family from eastern Ukraine when Russian aggression against Ukraine began in 2014. At that time, her home city remained under Ukrainian control and was not directly affected by combat. But since the intensification of Russian aggression in

February 2022, the city has been at the epicentre of warfare. Daria described how she felt when the war reached her home city:

I felt very bad. Because every shelling reported in the news ... you watch and look at the buildings. And you are remembering, what is there? Ah, it's where Auntie Anja lives. You start messaging: 'Auntie Anja, is everything fine with you?' 'Yes, everything is fine, sitting in the basement.' And it is so with everyone. ... Every day you are in such a state, it's unbearably painful. When your soul and your heart are there, with them, and there is nothing you can do. There is no way you can help.

With these words Daria started telling the story of her volunteer work to help Ukrainians to the host of a popular vlog with more than 500,000 subscribers and a mission to disseminate information about 'Russia's achievements'. An interview with Daria was posted on the vlog's YouTube channel in the summer of 2022, titled 'The Art of Volunteering'. According to this and multiple other media reports for which Daria was interviewed, it was shortly after war arrived at her former home city in Ukraine that she came across a request for assistance on social media from a single mother with a sick child, who had fled the city and arrived with nothing at the Border Region. Daria attempted to help the woman by providing essential supplies and information about available state support. As she met more families in similar situations, she recruited her friends to help with assistance provision, and started searching for other local volunteers to partner with. Daria invited those she found to a meeting convened in early spring 2022, to discuss how they could work together. Fourteen people attended the meeting, including Ivan, who by then had already created The Circle chat, comprising several dozen participants who mostly focused on delivering aid to the local PVR. During the meeting, it was decided that those present would come together and adopt The Circle chat's name for their newly emerged initiative. The existing chat, created by Ivan, would be the group's main communication channel, used for keeping in touch with one another and for searching for resources by contacting organizations, media outlets, and larger movements.

The strategy worked. The first large contribution that the volunteers received consisted of five tonnes of humanitarian aid sent from Moscow by an anonymous businessman. Two shipping containers, provided by one of the group's members, became their first aid warehouse. Daria emphasized publicly on many occasions that, from this point onwards, she dedicated herself to organizing the initiative's operations, developing a system of receiving and systematizing requests, setting up accountability procedures, and establishing routines for running the warehouse. This role was collectively recognized when, in August 2022, during a meeting of volunteers who

comprised the active core of The Circle at the time, Daria was elected head of the initiative.

The creator of the video 'The Art of Volunteering', which spotlights Daria's work, describes in said video various measures designed by the state to support refugees, including Ukrainians' entitlement to a one-time social benefits payment of 10,000 rubles (around 100 euros at the time of writing) and to accommodation in PVRs where meals and other essentials are provided free of charge. He goes on to say:

Of course, the state strives to make the refugees' lives easier, but, at the same time, it creates difficult bureaucratic procedures that one must go through in order to receive the one-time social benefit payment and a [legal] status, without which it is impossible to be employed or receive medical assistance. And, as usual, it [the state] is not in a rush to provide information to the stressed people who have to navigate all these complexities by themselves. ... You can see that the state forms the core of assistance for refugees, but it cannot reach and help all of those in need. This is why there spontaneously emerged another, surrounding, informal, mass societal layer [of assistance provision].

An animated picture of a thick light-strip wrapping tightly around a dark ball in the middle of the screen accompanies this statement.

This image of an additional, broad, and cushioning layer is an apt depiction of what Daria and the other patriotic volunteers appear to be doing. It can be said that, through their work, they extend the state's reach to people from Ukraine inside wartime Russia. They do so by making it easier for Ukrainians in Russia to connect with the state institutions; in the case of The Circle, at the time when it was headed by Daria, this was achieved not only by providing information about documents to be obtained, procedures to follow, and specific state organizations to contact, but also through opening an additional Telegram group chat almost entirely dedicated to sharing updates and local knowledge on these matters. Here is a snapshot of the discussion in this dedicated chat in July 2022:

- A: Hi everyone, we arrived and did not officially register as refugees. Now we are going through official employment. Is there anyone who can advise where to receive these documents, where to go to receive this status?
- B: Refugee status is granted to no-one, only temporary protection [status]. Call [address and phone number of a Border Region Directorate for Migration], call them, they will tell you everything.
- C: Hi! Could you tell me please, must one go for a health examination on an empty stomach?

- D: We went through a health examination for the temporary protection [status], not on an empty stomach. They take blood for AIDS and RW
- E: Guys, I obtained a CMI [medical insurance certificate] for myself and my daughter!!! If you do not know where and when to go, here is a photo [with information].
- F: Hi, could you direct me, which documents are needed to apply for a one-time [state benefits] payment? Those who applied in the Border Region, please advise 🙏
- G: Can anyone tell me, is there a long queue in [a town close to the capital of the Border Region] to extend temporary registration? Those who did this, what time did you arrive to be received at 9 in the morning? At 7 in the morning, at 6? Overnight???

Daria further extends the state's reach to people from Ukraine inside Russia through contributing to the adjustment and fine-tuning of the state mechanisms themselves. Daria has been performing this function with increasing intensity since the beginning of her volunteer work. For example, in June 2022 she asked The Circle chat members to provide her with input for informing state officials about refugees' problems, which require state intervention:

Dear friends, we must concisely and clearly formulate a list of our problems that need to be solved on an administrative level.

Questions regarding documents, health care, payments, education, employment etc.

I am going to a big office [Daria refers here to a meeting with a high-level official], this needs to be extremely brief and to the point. Help....

Often the impact of such efforts is hard to trace directly, although a number of relevant legislative changes were already effective by the summer of 2022, including a decree allowing people with Ukrainian passports to be employed without work permits. But sometimes these efforts to extend the state to refugees, and to ease the connection between them, leads to immediately visible adjustments, as reported by Daria at the end of August 2022 in The Circle chat:

I just spoke to the minister for youth policy of [capital city of the Border Region], [full name of the minister], and she stated that every child from Ukraine, Donetsk People's Republic, and Lugansk People's Republic will be provided with school supplies and school uniform. ... I just heaved a sigh of relief. I am happy that by the efforts of ordinary people we were able to reach out [to the state] and explain our problem, and WE WERE HEARD!

To facilitate school attendance by displaced children, Daria originally initiated the collection and distribution of school supplies to those who could not afford them. But, with the start of the school year approaching, she managed to present this problem to regional officials who took up the problem to be addressed through means at their disposal.

The significance of the patriotic volunteers’ work of extending the state’s reach by mediating between the state apparatus and people from Ukraine in Russia is not lost on the volunteers, nor on similarly minded others. ‘The Art of Volunteering’ video ends with a scene filmed at the two shipping containers that served as The Circle’s warehouse at the time. After showing Daria handing out packages of pasta and tinned meat, the camera moves to a middle-aged woman standing nearby. The woman is also a volunteer, who praises Daria and says the following about the volunteers’ work: ‘This is necessary to do. If we do not do it, we would have a knife in our back. Simple as that. Do you understand me?’

The video’s creator eagerly agrees, elaborating for the audience that ‘a knife in our back’ refers to the threat of an accumulation of discontent refugees in Russia, who, left without assistance and without integration measures, would direct their frustration at undermining Russia. The assistance provided by volunteers like Daria, the creator explains, offsets the state’s excessive bureaucracy and rigidity ‘thanks to their speed and flexibility’, preventing discontent and thus helping keep the state safer. The video’s creator further suggests that volunteers contribute to addressing the human resources shortages experienced by Russia in various domains, by facilitating the integration of refugees including ‘professionals with various specializations and talented school kids’ into the local education and production systems.

Extending the state beyond Russia

Daria parted ways with Ivan and The Circle’s chat in September 2022. Around that time, the Ukrainian counteroffensive had returned many settlements in the occupied territories to Ukrainian control, and the Border Region saw a manifold increase in people fleeing the active warzones. By mid-September, hundreds of people in cars and on foot were queuing at the border control checkpoint to enter the region. Daria described her involvement in this situation in an interview with a local online news outlet:

We reacted to this situation because I started seeing messages in our group [Daria refers here to The Circle chat], like: ‘My parents are on the border at [name of the checkpoint], how can they be picked up? Where to bring them?’ For me this was a signal, that in one day there were several such messages in a row. I understood that there was a stream of people there [at the border]. We joined together with two

other volunteer groups, [names of the groups], and we went there. We saw that people were waiting like this for two days. And the issue is not just that they are waiting, it's also that they departed urgently. Some of them, of course, managed to pack, to fill the trunk, but some of them packed in 10–15 minutes and left, not managing to take anything much with them. Besides, people counted on a shorter queue and that they would cross [the border] relatively fast, so almost nobody brought food and water supplies. While [they] waited for a day, everything ran out. And then what? There is nowhere to return to. You can move neither back nor forward, so people were trapped.

Daria's group of volunteers were among the first to deliver food and water to those waiting at the border. This same group posted a video online of the long queue, which was widely shared and attracted the attention of the regional administration. As a result of the publicity, a large section of the queue was redirected to another checkpoint, with more counters open. The Ministry of Emergencies sent first responders to the original checkpoint, who were followed by representatives of United Russia, Russia's ruling party, and the People's Front, a political coalition formally led by Putin, which links United Russia with various NGOs and movements. Several tents were set up under the Russian flag, where people who had crossed the border were offered hot food, tea, and leaflets with information on where to find assistance in the Border Region.

The conflict between Ivan and Daria, which resulted in the establishment of the Assistance Centre, began soon after the situation at the checkpoint normalized. The origins of the conflict were publicly recounted by Daria in a journalist's article published in early 2023:

Four days later, a short video was broadcast by [local TV station], where all of a sudden [Ivan] shows up, against the backdrop of [a village near the checkpoint], and with a smile tells everyone how we, including him, were helping refugees. He was not there at all. All the volunteers who had been there started asking: 'Who on earth is that?'

After a heated discussion in The Circle chat, Daria and everyone who took her side were blocked by Ivan, who, as the chat's creator, held the ownership rights. Daria repurposed a group chat she had previously created to relocate lengthy and general discussions among The Circle participants from the main chat, providing the following explanation to its members:

- A: What happened with The Circle group?
 Daria: We moved here. I as leader was banned in The Circle 🙊♀
 B: By bots?

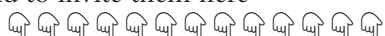
- Daria: no, by the channel owner
Daria: Most important is that the team of volunteers continues its work as before. Everything else is just life's little worries.

Members of Daria's repurposed chat who were not blocked by The Circle chat were asked to post the following message in The Circle chat:

!!!!!!Dear friends!! !!!! The volunteer group continues its work now in a new chat here [link to Daria's repurposed chat]

The changes were made for technical reasons. We ask for your understanding of these changes.

I would like to inform participants of The Circle chat about this and to invite them here



[link to Daria's repurposed chat]



All requests, photos, reports and activities will be publicized here from now on. Thank you for your support and understanding.

In this way, the chat initially created as a space for discussions among The Circle's members became the main space for communication regarding Daria's work. The chat was renamed the Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova, in line with the name of the NGO Daria officially registered.

After breaking with Ivan and The Circle, and parallel to developing her connections with state officials, Daria increasingly began venturing into the occupied territories. In yet another interview to a local online news outlet, Daria spoke about her involvement in managing the so-called refugee crisis in the Border Region in September 2022. She first emphasized that when the Ukrainian counteroffensive was launched, there was no centralized evacuation organized and everyone who reached the Border Region from the areas of warfare did so with no support and, most often, with little understanding of where they were going and what they were going to do there. Daria then proceeded to ask: 'How did this happen? You were telling people that "Russia is here forever", and people believed you, they received passports, they started working in Russian schools and administrations, started settling their peaceful lives, and then you simply left. How can this be?'

The 'you' in this reproach can be understood as directed not at the author of the now (in)famous saying 'Russia is here forever' or at specific troops who did not withstand the counteroffensive. Rather, it can be understood as directed at the Russian state, which, according to Daria, should have stayed where it promised to stay, but did not. Against this backdrop, Daria's

work in the occupied territories that remain under Russian control can be seen as an effort to extend Russian state and strengthen its presence there.

In December 2023, wearing body armour and a helmet and accompanied by members of the local defence forces, Daria delivered New Year presents to the residents of several settlements in the occupied territories closest to the Border Region. This was her first visit. In an interview to a local online news outlet in January 2024, Daria stated that during this visit she learned about the struggles of the only remaining bread factory in the area to source flour, and about the freezing temperatures in people's homes owing to the lack of fuel. As a recipient of a We Are Together award, Daria was able to meet the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office to discuss these issues. This is how she described the meeting and subsequent events in this interview:

I went to this meeting with bread from this factory in [occupied territory closest to the Border Region] we visited. I showed this bread, and I said that the factory needs flour, the people need coal. They are freezing ... And imagine, already at the beginning of January, enormous amounts of aid start pouring in. Three thousand tons of coal, food. Huge amounts of construction materials, plastic sheeting. The Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church joined in, they are ready to help with medicines, flour, with everything that is needed.

Daria's account of bringing bread from the occupied territories to the meeting in the Presidential Executive Office, and requesting flour and coal from the state to go to these territories, allows discernment of what extending the Russian state beyond Russia's borders can entail. Extending the state within Russia to reach arriving Ukrainian people mostly takes the form of easing the integration of the newcomers into the state bureaucratic apparatus, and adapting this apparatus to their situations; extending the state beyond Russia into the occupied territories operates differently. What Daria and her group appear to do in the latter case is configuring a caring facet of the state by reminding officials of those remaining in the warzones under Russian control, and bringing relief to these people which is unequivocally presented as coming from Russia. In summer 2022, before Daria left The Circle, she wrote in The Circle's chat discussing the situations of people whose homes were destroyed or damaged in the war: 'Russia is big and strong and can really help.' In a sense, Daria's volunteer activities in the occupied territories materialize exactly that vision: the state that is big and strong, and, most importantly, caring about those still remaining on the territories it now controls. The explicit ambition to extend the reach of the Russian state, discussed in this section, is another key differentiation between

patriotic volunteers and their resistance-driven counterparts, described in the previous chapters.

Animating ideological formulas

The third characteristic of the patriotic volunteer initiatives' operation I would like to single out here is their ability to animate official ideological formulas. In this section, I describe The Circle's operations in more detail, to illustrate what animating ideological formulas through assistance provision might entail in practice.

'One people'

After Daria's expulsion from The Circle in September 2022, Ivan was named as the group's head. Ivan has been living in the Border Region since the 1990s. He works as a small business owner and has written one fiction book, which led him to become a member of the Union of Writers of Russia (UWR). The detail about Ivan's UWR membership is important, because already prior to the intensification of the Russian aggression towards Ukraine in February 2022 and prior to the emergence of The Circle, Ivan had participated in multiple visits arranged by UWR to Ukrainian territories under Russian control in the Donetsk region. Beginning in 2015, UWR has delivered humanitarian aid and books to the Donetsk and Lugansk self-proclaimed republics. Then its activities have expanded to arranging literary events for civilians and combatants in these regions, with titles like 'Russian writers for Russian Donbass', and to organizing literary competitions on topics such as the 'Russian World' and 'Russian Donbass'.

Ivan was a regular participant in these activities as by that time he came to firmly subscribe to the idea of the so-called all-Russian nation. This idea can be illustrated by the words Putin used in the opening of his essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', published on the Kremlin website on 12 July 2021:

During the recent Direct Line [public phone-in with Putin], when I was asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, I said that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole. These words were not driven by some short-term considerations or prompted by the current political context. It is what I have said on numerous occasions and what I firmly believe.

When Ivan became the sole leader of The Circle, the ideological formula of Russians and Ukrainians being 'one people' became an incessant refrain

in the group chat, as the following selection of posts spanning one and a half years indicates:

Ivan: In a large family there are three men. They have one single warm jacket. We are giving one more, but jackets are needed for all. We are one people. Peaceful sky to everyone! [1.11.2022]

Ivan: \$\$\$Dear chat participants. Today a volunteer force from 'The Circle' returned to [Border Region] from the Lugansk region of Russia. Returned without losses. We worked in [a town in the occupied territories]. Then part of the force went to perform tasks in Lugansk. Sad things: [The town] really needs our help. Almost in all spheres of life the need is great. People often live in destroyed buildings. Everything is complicated with food. Few employment options. Prices are high. Good things: in many parts of the city there is electricity and water. Public transportation works. Two hospitals and two pharmacies work. There are several averagely stocked stores. A market works. Now we are digesting the information and preparing our next visit. Our people are there!! We are one people!!! [13.02.2023]

Ivan: We are helping only within RF [Russian Federation]. And trying to persuade people not to leave for the west. We are one people!!! And this war was started specifically by the western countries against MY motherland, USSR! There is no need to go there [to the west]. It is better that we help settling [refugees] in other cities of Russia. There are options. [05.06.2023]

The Circle
[Ivan posting
under the
group name]:

Today was an amazing moment – a deafmute woman from [an occupied city] came to our warehouse. To understand each other, we message each other, but it did not make the dialogue less vivid, emotional, and memorable. We speak one language – in the figurative and in the very real sense. We are the same, one, common, it is simply that some of us were unlucky enough to find themselves in a conflict zone, this is the only difference. We should help our own.

If something happens to us, nobody will help us either,
except our own. [17.08.2023]

As can be seen here, the 'one people' formula appears in The Circle chat fairly regularly; but in the context of volunteer assistance provision, the regular invocation of 'one people' achieves more than a simple repetition. Attached to specific activities – such as sharing a jacket, delivering food packages, providing nappies, blankets, and other necessities – the 'one people' formula stops being an abstract rhetoric, becoming, instead, something more alive and tangible.

The open chat format itself eases the performance of this work of animating official ideological formulas. Posts with information about assistance received or provided are simply followed by a brief interpretation of the assistance as an expression of 'we are one people'. Regular rehearsal accords this pairing stability and a sense of self-evidence: the assistance provided is a visible and tangible indication of the truth of the 'one people' formula, whereas 'one people' is the ultimate 'higher' meaning of various acts of assistance. Following Ivan, other participants of The Circle chat have started using the 'one people' formula in a similar way, animating it by attaching it to concrete acts of assistance:

Vera: Good evening to everyone, today [I] was a volunteer in [The Circle's warehouse], we ourselves arrived from [a city in the occupied territory] that was destroyed building by building. ... I want to express my huge gratitude to all inhabitants of [Border Region] for solidarity, social activism, and for helping others in trouble. To The Circle for managing to connect so many like-minded people across the entire country, who are ready to help. These are people who are not indifferent to others' problems, who understand the seriousness of the situation, who take risks, but still provide help! You are really a team. I want to call out to all those who would like to help, we are lacking men's clothes for autumn and winter and shoes. We won't manage without you. We are one people and you really have proven that you do not leave your own behind! [10.07.2023]

The phrase about not leaving one's own behind is another well-known official ideological formula frequently invoked in The Circle chat, typically by or in reference to the volunteers themselves, whose work is presented as an illustration of what it means to 'not leave one's own behind':

Sasha: 'Not leaving our own behind 🙌 🌸' –
We continue supporting however we can: [name] from
[city in Russia] sends diapers and disposable sheets, [name]

household cleaning products, food, blankets, pillow, [name] collected warm clothes in [the warehouse of another volunteer initiative] ...

This is how it becomes possible to help one family, with the participation of MANY people, some of them visible, some not. ...

Thanks to all of you who provide clothes, send in money, who help with sorting clothes, delivering packages, supporting with your words and acts.

Peace and kindness to all! ❀❀❀ [10.10.2022]

Zina: And I am here. ❤️ Over two months a small group of teachers from a small school in [a town in Russia] sent around 70 parcels to [Border Region]. Specifically because [we] DO NOT LEAVE OUR OWN BEHIND [23.11.2022]

The effect is the same as in the case of ‘one people’: an abstract, official ideological formula becomes rooted in specific, tangible, and relatable activities, thus acquiring a body, weight, and life, or in other words, becoming animate.

The enemy

The main focus of The Circle’s volunteer activities has been reconfigured over time. Initially, the initiative mostly focused on providing assistance to refugees in the Border Region, delivering standard packages with food and household products almost daily to families who filled in a Google form to request assistance. The volunteers also searched for items specifically requested by families beyond the standard packages, and maintained a warehouse of donated clothing. In time, however, this line of work shrank as Ivan and other volunteers started venturing more often into the occupied territories to deliver humanitarian aid. By 2024, as I write this chapter, The Circle’s assistance to people from Ukraine in the Border Region mostly consists of maintaining a warehouse with donated clothing and essentials, providing a space in the Telegram chat for asking for information and items not stocked at the warehouse, and occasionally informing chat participants about job vacancies in the region.

The visits to the occupied territories gradually took precedence over assistance provision in the Border Region. In an interview given to a YouTube blogger early in 2024, Ivan described the meaning he ascribes to these visits in the following words: ‘It is my fighting line, my blindage, my trench.’ The fight he refers to here, and on many other occasions, is the fight ‘for people’s minds’. This idea is illustrated by a conversation in The Circle chat from early spring 2023, between Ivan and other volunteers, regarding

the topic of Ukrainian people from the occupied territories who want to leave Russia for the EU. Ivan wrote a post where he asked Ukrainians not to leave for the EU:

Today once again I received a request to help with departing to Europe. People want to go to Poland. To Germany. Further, to Spain. Further, to Portugal. And where can you go further, when you are not needed in Europe. The Atlantic is further.

But you are needed here. In Russia.

I agree that many things are difficult. Sometimes it is impossible to take it any longer. But do not despair. You, people from ideology-crazed Ukraine, you are on your soil now. Russia needs you. We need you. We are one people.

Do not leave. Please. Everything will settle down. Not in one day, but it will. We speak one language. We have one history and culture. We are one.

Europe does not need you even for the lowest paying jobs [21:55]

Other volunteers commented on Ivan's post, starting a discussion in which Ivan explained why he wrote the post in the first place, and what role volunteer assistance provision in the occupied territories can play:

Volunteer 1

[in reference

to those

leaving for

the EU]:

well, let them try, it is not as easy as it seems [22:21]

Ivan:

People throw themselves about out of despair. Out of helplessness. Out of exhaustion. Not everything is smooth and ideal in Russia either. But here we have these fundamental principles that do not go against our mentality. This is why I want to protect people from taking wrong steps [22:23]

Volunteer 2:

how can one go to our enemies. [Ivan], we must make a decision [about] where our Motherland is. ... [22:25]

Ivan:

You and I have decided. But there are people in confusion. Now the fighting is not for territory. The fighting is for minds. For children. This is why we are going across the line [to the occupied territories] with books!!! With our Soviet movies. With our poems and literature. [22:27]

This exchange demonstrates how the formulas of 'one people' who 'do not leave their own behind', which The Circle continuously animates with

its work, are incomplete without another piece of the official ideological construction: ‘the enemy’. For a while, The Circle addressed this third formula – the existence of the enemy – indirectly, by occasionally referring to those who are against the reunion of the ‘one people’, necessitating that the latter stick together and bring anyone undecided on this ideology to their side through the provision of assistance. However, from summer 2023, The Circle chat exhibits explicit indications that the initiative has embraced a new type of assistance provision, which engages more directly with the idea of fighting ‘the enemy’: assistance provision to the Russian military.

From that time, posts with photos of, for example, humanitarian aid delivered to a hospital in the occupied territories (‘Our guys delivered aid to a hospital in [city in the occupied territories]. Together we will normalize life in the city. Peaceful and Happy!!!’) started being interspersed with photos of car trunks filled with packages for military personnel, and of the pleased recipients (‘Delivery from [a city in Russia]. Sorting and sending to the front line for our fighters. Everything for a good cause. Everything to help the guys. Everything for the victory!!!’). In July 2023, notification of The Circle’s shift in focus was posted in the chat:

Friends (especially those who joined us recently), apart from providing food packages, household cleaning products and other stuff to refugees, selforganization [The Circle] works on the following:

- ✓help with making camouflage netting for the front lines,
- ✓production of trench candles,
- ✓knitting socks for soldiers,
- ✓collecting donations for purchasing and producing ‘dry shower’ – for hygiene purposes in a field environment,
- ✓collecting donations, purchasing, and transporting aid for the territories freed from nazis.

These are food, household cleaning products, children’s books, textbooks, movies, bed linen, crockery and appliances. Everything that is desperately needed by people who went through the horrors of war in basements .

We very much need all help from all not indifferent people!

Join in and we together will help our soldiers bring victory and peace to our Motherland sooner!

Today The Circle’s regular deliveries to Russian military units in or close to the Border Region include a much broader assortment of items than those mentioned in the aforementioned post, including tents, batteries, thermowear, sleeping bags, and cooking appliances. The deliveries are reported in the chat, with descriptions of the difference they made and highlighting the importance of supporting ‘our guys’. Recipients pose

for accompanying pictures and videos, sometimes with their faces hidden, and some write directly in The Circle chat, such as this message from March 2024:

Huge thanks to [three names], Ivan, and the entire [The Circle team] from the military logistical support unit for their great help in urgently delivering aid in the form of sleeping bags, warm clothes, food, etc. Thanks to all concerned volunteers here and beyond the line ... Believe me, your help is often priceless and saves not only the health but also the lives of the fighters.

Through providing assistance to the military and publicizing this work via its Telegram chat, The Circle contributes to making the existence of 'the enemy', posited by the official rhetoric, and fight against this enemy more palpable and urgent. As a result, 'the enemy' might not gain in specificity – being variously referred to as 'the west', 'nazis', or more broadly those against the 'Russian World' – but it does gain a sensed materiality, by being mentioned in the chat in connection to concrete 'our' soldiers who wear socks provided by volunteers, sleep in bags provided by volunteers, and eat food cooked in the pots provided by volunteers. Through this connection, those who these concrete soldiers are fighting become more real, animating and grounding the abstract 'enemy' proclaimed by the official ideological talk. Moreover, by pairing their assistance provision to refugees and those living in the war-stricken occupied territories with their assistance provision to military personnel, The Circle's operation adds coherence to a heap of state-produced ideological formulas. By conjuring 'one people' united against 'the enemy', with the entire construction concretized and grounded in specific, observable activities, the initiative makes the state's abstract rhetoric animated and powerfully reinforced.

Looking at the work of Assistance Centre and The Circle, two volunteer initiatives introduced in this chapter, we can observe certain particularities of their operation. I distinguished three: (i) their work is highly publicized; (ii) it seeks to extend the state within and beyond Russia; and (iii) it animates official ideological formulas. Although the precise expression of these characteristics varies between different patriotic initiatives, in one way or another they are all fundamentally aligned in their publicity, their state-extending ambitions, and their use of digitally aided strategies to make abstract ideological formulas concrete and alive.

The work of the patriotic volunteers can be understood as a form of public participation. Like contentious volunteer initiatives described in the previous chapters, these initiatives attempt to deal with the issue of collective concern – the war – in ways that are unscripted and spontaneously configured. While the patriotic initiatives are certainly not contentious towards the state and

state-initiated actions, they also are not organized by the state, and their activities are not prescribed by state officials. Instead, the patriotic initiatives creatively add to, develop, and co-shape the dominant meanings, political strategies, and the state itself, being, hence, truly participatory. Moreover, both patriotic and contentious volunteer initiatives rely heavily on digital technologies for connecting members within their disparate collectivities and for taking action – that is, for participating.

What does make patriotic initiatives different from previously introduced contentious volunteer initiatives that resist dominant meanings, political strategies, and the state itself, is the world patriotic initiatives' attempt to bring into existence with their activities. What belongs to this world, and how it is arranged, is so drastically incompatible with the alternative world coalescing around the actions of the contentious volunteer initiatives that no engagement between the two is possible. The resulting division is not debated as is commonly expected to be done with political disagreements, is not acted out, and cannot be reconciled or bridged, however temporarily.

INTERMEZZO 4

Reflections on National Identities

Different disciplines have widely taken up the idea, introduced in earlier intermezzi, that digital technologies enable an unprecedented level of connectivity, which impacts how action is taken to address matters of shared concern. One aspect of this idea as formulated by Bennett and Segerberg in the concept of connective action ([Bennett and Segerberg, 2012](#)), has been debated, however. This aspect is the claim that collective identities lose their significance in motivating and organizing action that relies on digital connectivity. Many scholars advocate for the continuing importance of collective identities in the digital age ([Vicari, 2022](#)).

The story told in this book supports the latter side in this debate, albeit, refraining from conceiving of identities in the ‘strong’ sense – that is, as referring to some fundamental ‘sameness’ across members of certain pre-existent groupings. Instead, throughout the previous chapters I highlighted glimpses of a Russian identity as an identity in-the-making. Or I should rather say *identities* because the digitally mediated participatory practices of the deeply divided public that emerged around the issue of war feed into the formation of different and incompatible national identities. This emergent public has made no attempt to define and contest what constitutes ‘Russianness’ overall; rather, efforts are focused on differentiating and pulling apart from those who are holding on to other, incompatible versions of the same national identity. To ground this story in the existing literature, this last intermezzo engages, first, with the scholarship on nations and then, on national identities.

Scholarship on nations is extensive and diverse. There is, however, one far-reaching insight on which most scholars in the field today agree. It is that there is nothing natural, inevitable, or even necessary about nations. Rogers Brubaker famously argued that instead of understanding nations as real enduring entities, we should think of them as categories produced in practice and contingent happenings institutionalized in certain forms ([Brubaker, 1996](#)). It might be tempting to think of the nation as a primordial form of societal organization, stemming from an immemorial unity of culture,

language, religion, and, in many versions, ethnicity. According to this picture, which is preferred by nationalists of all stripes, nations have always been there; that the term ‘nation’ has been in wide circulation for only about two hundred recent years is put down to the fact that that is when the nations were widely discovered and identified as such. But, as the historians [Carol Harrison and Ann Johnson \(2009, p 4\)](#) put it: ‘[na]tions required efforts of construction, invention, and imagination rather than simply identification; they were never already there waiting to enter history’.

How, then, do nations come into being? Or perhaps a better question would be: how does a large group of people, most of whom will never know each other, start thinking of themselves as being part of the same nation? Invaluable contribution to answering this question was made by Benedict Anderson who more than three decades ago defined a nation as an imagined community. In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he documented how, initially, the possibility even to think in terms of nations was borne out of changes ‘in modes of apprehending the world’, including the rise of a new conception of time as homogenous, that is measurable by clock and calendar, and marked by multiple activities taking place simultaneously and independently ([Anderson, 2006](#)).

The novel and newspaper in 18th-century Europe exemplify this new idea of time. In the 18th-century novel, Anderson argues, readers could witness multiple acts performed at the same clocked time, by actors who are largely unaware of one another. It provided an analogy for thinking about a nation moving steadily through history, with its every member having no idea what their fellow nationals are up to at any given moment, yet being fully confident in their continuous, simultaneous activity. The newspaper, furthermore, printed on a colossal scale, created an extraordinary mass ceremony whereby particular morning and evening editions were consumed at more or less fixed hours, with readers being aware of thousands of others engaged, simultaneously, in reading the same texts, and repeating this ceremony daily. ‘What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?’ Anderson writes. ‘At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life’ ([Anderson, 2006, p 35](#)).

Anderson further adds print-capitalism to the mix of unplanned and accidental developments that formed an idea or, rather, a blueprint of the nation (with independent nation-state attached), and supported the blueprint’s dissemination. This addition emphasized how the book-publishing enterprise’s relentless search for markets led to a reorientation from expensive books for readers of Latin to cheap, popular editions in the

vernaculars, chosen in a pragmatic, if not haphazard manner, which, in turn helped to create unified fields of communication. Anderson so explains the significance of this development:

Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. ... [P]rint-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation. (Anderson, 2006, p 44)

It is important to emphasize that, apart from being contingent, the birth of the nation – a process whereby it became possible for people who would not in their lifetimes have known one another to think of themselves as belonging to one nation and to share a strongly felt sense of communion – is also multidirectional and distributed between different milieus. Not only was it enabled by a novel calendrical way of comprehending time and simultaneity, animated by the regularity of mass newspaper reading, and powerfully driven by print-capitalism. Anderson also showed that it was supported by maps that anticipated the spatial reality of nations, by censuses that constructed and quantified ethno-racial categories (which were subsequently taken as the basis for forming nation-state bureaucracies), and by museums in which the continuity of nations is powerfully asserted.

If this is how nations are imagined, how do they come to be imagined as particular kinds of nations? This question has usually been contemplated by scholars under the rubric of ‘national identity’. Three points made by this vast scholarship are particularly pertinent to the story told in this book.

The first point is that national identity cannot simply be prescribed. There are some accounts which claim that elite groups define ‘the nation into existence by linguistic instruction designed to create nationally conscious subjects’, and the role of the masses is to ‘embody’ the definitions provided (Surak, 2012, p 200). But this strict differentiation between top-down and bottom-up practices of formulating and enacting the supposedly essential characteristics of a nation is often problematic, as illustrated by Gabrielle Hecht’s study of the entwinement between technological change and the (re)forming of national identity. Hecht (1998) showed how in post-Second World War France, particular designs for nuclear reactors were represented

by technologists as being essentially French, and fed powerfully into defining specifically French form of industrial development and, ultimately, imagining the nation's future. Here nuclear technology is not merely symbolically important; it is both the outcome of a process of imagining a modern French nation, and an important vehicle for cultivating and grounding this imaginary. Not only is it difficult to clearly differentiate between top-down and bottom-up components of this process – political elites were involved but not centrally, and where should we position workers and engineers? – it is not necessarily productive for understanding how national identities are shaped, as we might miss many processes that do not fit into this scheme. Of course, this is not to say that power differentials are never at play in the formation of national identities; only that a national identity requires a diversity of cultural, economic, and material practices, which are widely distributed and continuous, in order to emerge and, crucially, to persist. A top-down, prescriptive articulation of what a nation should stand for is not enough.

The second point made by the national identities scholarship I would like to emphasize is this: continual exercises are required to maintain shared imaginaries of nationhood. As Hecht puts it, ideas about national identity ‘must be actively cultivated in order to persist’ (Hecht, 1998, p 12). Again, this does not refer to some form of regulated repetition of definitions formulated by political elites, although such strategies are often employed. Rather, Hecht's statement indicates that imaginaries of national identity must be articulated and rehearsed continuously across multiple milieus and through diverse means to maintain their coherence and grip. This is how they change as well – no national identity can be imagined in an entirely uniform and firmly fixed manner. Ulrike Felt (2015) shows how the rehearsal of national identity and concomitant change can happen in an entirely unregulated manner over the course of decades, using the example of nuclear and agrobiotechnologies in Austria. Felt argues that ‘a specific kind of “Austrianness” became tied to an imaginary of technological choice, namely, keeping a set of technologies out of the national territory and becoming distinctive as a nation precisely by refusing to embrace them’ (Felt, 2015, p 104). This shaping of Austrian national identity was not determined in advance. It emerged together with the public's refusal to adopt the technologies in question, and gradually stabilized through prolonged public debates and protests which successively imagined Austria as free from nuclear dangers and entities unfit for an Austrian food culture centred on ‘naturalness’.

In her analysis, Felt also makes the third point about national identities which I would like to emphasize for the story in this book. This point is that national identities are intensely future-oriented. It is a common trope in scholarship to investigate how nations seek to demonstrate an unbroken

connection to a glorious past; Felt's study demonstrates how national identities are also shaped with a view of specific national futures to be attained and to be avoided.

Overall, when discussing nations and their identities, it is important to remember that first, the possibility of thinking about the world in terms of nations is the relatively recent outcome of a convergence of multiple unplanned developments. And second, that nations as such are imagined communities, which depend for their coherence and ability to inspire a firm sense of belonging on persistent articulation and rehearsal of ideas about what a nation stands for and what future it is to attain. Importantly, such articulation and rehearsal rely not only on linguistic means, but equally on material ones as an example of the role of French nuclear reactors in imagining a modern French nation shows.

A final question to note here is how digital media play out in this picture. The arrival of digital technologies has been heralded by some scholars as a vehicle of post-nationalism. Building on Anderson's idea of the centrality of 18th-century print media for imagining the togetherness of nations, these scholars hypothesize that the newly arrived globalized digital media will eventually dissolve national identities and render the idea of nations meaningless. But is this what is happening? The starting point of the next and final chapter is to consider how digital media matter for nations and national identities in light of the Russian wartime volunteer initiatives. It then brings together the various strands of the story told here in a reflection on what this story could mean for our understanding of participation and politics in contemporary societies.

CHAPTER 4

A World Less Common

A note on national identities: the nation multiple

This book could have been written without consideration of the topic of national identities. After all, its story is about digital media and participation, and there is a wealth of scholarship analysing the relationship between the two without referring to nation-focused concepts. In fact, there are many situations in which attempting to understand digital mediation of participation in terms of nations has the potential to obscure the extent and dynamics of participatory networks.

However, the story – which is set in an authoritarian situation of a country that initiated a war causing destruction, suffering, and death – renders the topic of national identities difficult to sideline. This was revealed to me during my very first interviews with volunteers who were attempting to act contrary to the dominant order. Nearly all of these volunteers, in one way or another, expressed that it is their ‘Russianness’ that compels them to volunteer, in an effort to ‘do something’ about the issue of war. Although it is possible that many of them would still feel concerned about the war if they were not tied to the aggressor country, in such a case their concern would be unlikely to exercise similarly compelling force to act, being devoid of acutely felt personal responsibility. The patriotic volunteers whose activities I moved on to study later are similarly driven to act by their ‘Russianness’, although they are attempting to ‘do something’ very different in relation to the ongoing war.

In this situation, national identity is hard to sideline because it is precisely national identity that makes it close to impossible for the volunteer collectives of both kinds not to be concerned about the issue of war. Again, a considerable body of research that traced the co-emergence of publics with issues of their concern shows that national identity is not an essential ingredient in this process. Becoming concerned and emerging as a public in the process of articulating and addressing the concern might have nothing to do with national identities, relying instead on commitments to a vegetarian

lifestyle or, alternatively, to ensuring the profitability of industrial farming, to use an example of genetically modified tomatoes from *Intermezzo* 3.1.

But in order to understand the emergence of the divided public described here, it is necessary to note that it is national identity that most closely implicates this public in the issue of war. Moreover, it is national identity that makes them inescapably connected to one another, despite acting on vastly different commitments to mutually exclusive national futures. I shall return to this idea of a divided public and their participation later in this chapter, with the aforementioned, I hope, being sufficient to establish the relevance of national identity for this exploration of digital media and participation.

What kind of national identity can we see at play in the volunteers' work described in the previous chapters? It is clearly a Russian one. Contentious volunteers are not trying to disassociate themselves from their 'Russianness'; rather, they embrace it, and act largely in its name. Likewise, the patriotic volunteers are not trying to forge a new, transcendent identity that they could relate to alongside all others they consider to be 'one people' with themselves. They are happy with their 'Russianness' as supposedly already encompassing everyone meant to be united.

However, while both groupings are confident in their 'Russianness', it is clear that they configure the Russian national identity in very different ways. Since my research focus was not on the national identity per se, I do not attempt a detailed delineation of each version. Doing so would also be challenging given that neither version is firmly fixed and stably delineated. Scholarship reviewed in *Intermezzo* 4 suggests that this is quite typical of national identities since they rely on continuous articulation and rehearsal to persist, and tend to change in the process. Yet, the versions of the Russian national identity considered here are particularly fuzzy, because they are being configured speedily amid turbulence and conflict. What further adds to their fuzziness is that the configuration of each version centres on a decisive break with the alternative. Not attempting to work out an identity that could be broadly shared – some overall 'Russianness' – implies little need for clarifying the attributes of an identity through discussion and other forms of mutual engagement between conflicting views. It is sufficient to settle on key demarcation points that define the kind of 'Russianness' it is possible for some to live with and absolutely impossible to reconcile with for others.

A key idea that demarcates the versions of national identity being configured by the volunteer collectives described in this book is that of expansionism. Although nobody I spoke to told me explicitly they were in favour of or against expansion, strong feelings about Russia's current attempts to expand into Ukraine and justifications of these feelings were evident in how volunteers spoke to me and others and in what they have been doing. For the patriotic volunteer collectives such expansion for unification with 'our own people' is at the centre of their 'Russianness'. For contentious

volunteers such expansion is imperialist aggression and rejecting it is at the core of their ‘Russianness’.

The area of relations with other states represents another point of contrast. In the work practices and communications of the patriotic volunteer initiatives we can discern that they consider large parts of the rest of the world, especially most Western democracies, to be enemies. Incidentally, it is disagreement with the expansion at the heart of the patriotic volunteers’ version of the Russian identity that makes these states enemies that are apparently against the ‘Russianness’ itself. Contentious volunteers view other states, and particularly most Western democracies, as neighbours and potential partners with whom an agreement on the unacceptability of imperialism is possible.

Considering these two points of demarcation, the third point – on the topic of the war – comes as no surprise. For the patriotic volunteers the war is a long-overdue correction of the historical mistake of splitting up ‘one people’. For the contentious volunteers it is nothing other than a crime, the consequences of which will continue to reverberate throughout the decades to come.

Although taking a note of the national identity here is important for understanding the divided public that has emerged in Russia together with the issue of war, it can also provide grounds for commenting on the national identities in the digital age more generally. I outlined earlier the two versions of the Russian national identity in-the-making, distinguishable in the operation of the volunteering ecosystem that sprang to life after 24 February 2022. They can be called versions of the national identity because they are not mere rhetorical constructions. They rely on a diverse set of continuously performed practices of assistance provision, which serve as a tangible means of articulating and cultivating ideas about what the nation should and should not stand for. These practices are widely distributed and digitally coordinated, with digital media allowing an extensive reach and possibility for numerous dispersed collectives to participate in imagining the nation and its future. Grounded in real-world practices, and collectively scaled up via digital media, these imaginaries inspire a firm sense of belonging among some and an equally firm sense of enmity among others.

The emergence of two mutually exclusive versions of the Russian national identity, each of which has acquired considerable solidity and grip, suggests something about the possibilities of digitally driven post-nationalism. That digital media have not rendered national identities obsolete seems apparent from a strong comeback of the nation-state in recent years. The manifestations of this resurgence include the reinforcement of national borders, anti-immigration policies, and the rising influence of sovereigntist politicians in many parts of the world, including the EU and the United States. But

we cannot say that digital media have been entirely inconsequential in this regard, either.

Let us recall here Benedict Anderson and his communities (Anderson, 2006; see Intermezzo 4), the national togetherness of which was possible to imagine largely thanks to novels and newspapers. Taking these print media as the point of departure and putting them side by side with new digital media, we can see that the means of imagining nations have become much more widely distributed and accessible. Whereas in the era of print media, most would not have access to these means in a capacity other than that of a reader, now, in the era of digital media, things are very different. This does not mean that anyone can concoct a viable alternative national identity in no time; it is not an easy task to engender an identity that would have a wide enough grip, appeal, and persistence. Nor am I suggesting that it was impossible for people to disagree on what is essentially Russian, or Austrian, or French in the past.

Yet, the story told in this book suggests that digital media have enabled the construction of multiple different ‘strong’ versions of the same national identity by making the means of imagining nations more accessible. I say ‘strong’ to highlight that the versions I refer to here are not simply a plethora of thoughts about nations sharing which is now eased by digital media. Instead, digital media enable the construction of different versions of a national identity that are materially rooted, continuously rehearsed through practices that reach beyond the digital environment per se, and are shaped collectively. Thus, while in the times of print media ideas of what a nation stands for and what kinds of future it should attain could very well differ and be contested, the construction of full-blown or ‘strong’ versions of the same national identity was much less possible than has been the case since the emergence of digital media.

So, digitally facilitated post-nationalism did not arrive in the form of the dissolution of nations. But, perhaps, it has emerged in the form of the multiplication of nations, with digital technologies making construction of multiple ‘strong’ national identities much more doable than before. On the one hand, this development could be one of the many ways in which digital media are divisive, causing the fragmentation of societies and endangering social cohesion. On the other hand, in situations like those described in this book the emergence of alternative, strong national identities capable of resilience and a strong grip on collective imagination can be a source of hope.

Participation: de-composing a common world

What can the stories from the previous chapters tell us about participation? These stories highlight the co-emergence of a new public, participation formats this public engages in, and the issue in which groupings within this

public are jointly and antagonistically implicated. The public in question did not exist prior to the intensification of Russian aggression in Ukraine. After 24 February 2022, diverse commitments, ranging from defying the imperative of supporting the aggression bestowed by the state on Russian citizens to upholding an expansionist vision of Russia, unescapably entangled many with the issue of war. Searching for a way to act on their commitments, people were also looking, often digitally, for those with whom it would be possible to have something in common.

Previous chapters have highlighted that this digitally mediated search has resulted in thousands of people becoming connected and engaged in exploring what can be done. A mode of action in which many of those newly connected have gradually settled in ended up focusing on the provision of assistance to people from Ukraine in Russia. As such, they formed what can be described as mostly informal, decentred volunteer initiatives engaged in helping people from Ukraine leave Russia, receive medical help, or receive assistance to stay. Importantly, some of these initiatives, such as FP (see [Chapter 1](#)) and On the Move (see [Chapter 2](#)), make it clear that viewing them simply as collections of individuals with similar pre-existing ideas does not do justice to the process of their emergence. Instead, these initiatives show how ideas about possible ways to resist, to act somehow contrary to the dominant order, have shaped up in the process of coming together of these collectives, of experimentally trying out different versions of how they can be composed and how they can act.

Through taking it upon themselves to act on the issue of their concern, the volunteer initiatives that formed after 24 February 2022 have emerged as a public. In the processes of buying tickets, composing itineraries, distributing suitcases and nappies, arranging physicians' consultations, and many more such activities, the volunteers have also been clarifying the issue that compelled them to act. What are the stakes? What kind of country can they imagine themselves a part of (and what kind of country can they not)? How can the possibility of a liveable future be brought about? We could notice that this public, especially the endangered initiatives that pursue resistance, does very little of what is typically expected of a public: their action does not rely on talking and has no explicit focus on deliberating the matters of their concern. It is through *doing* that some volunteers call for the recognition of the suffering being inflicted by their country, and claim their responsibility as Russian citizens to attempt to address it, while others, also mostly through carrying out very similar doing, call for the recognition of the 'oneness' of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, and claim their responsibility to support the state's efforts to 'unify' them.

Thus, seeing their attachments to particular ways of living and futures threatened by the war, the groupings within the public described in this book have been trying to address this issue. In other words, the volunteer

work they have been doing can be understood as public participation. Their participation relies on practices many of which appear to be quite mundane, which begs the question: how politically significant can, say, buying a train ticket or providing a suitcase be? Yet when these practices tie together and stabilize an expansive network, which, over the course of more than four years, persistently performs them at scale, developing in the process a range of new capabilities, their significance is hard to overlook. The network of contentious volunteer initiatives, in particular, can be seen as assembling a tangible alternative to the world in which they are citizens of the war-waging country. Hoping for a world more liveable than this one, they ground this alternative in their flexible and efficient ways of working as well as in the trust and solidarity that these ways of working have come to produce, and depublicize it, striving to attract as little attention as possible from those whose aspirations are not compatible with theirs.

There is also something else that the volunteer networks of resistance do by quietly bringing to life their alternative: they are decisively separating themselves from those other members of the public whose aspirations are incompatible with theirs. And here we cannot fail to notice the central characteristic of the public that emerged in Russia around the issue of the war: this public is deeply divided. Divided publics are not a uniquely Russian development, nor even a development limited to authoritarian situations. Noortje Marres recently noted, with reference to long-established democracies:

Today's crises – climate change, cost of living, war, right-wing extremism, COVID-19, social inequality, and techno-capitalism – seem different: there is plenty of antagonism, division, polarization, conflict, and contradiction between social groupings, but this does not seem to produce a sufficient condition for 'bringing politics back,' for the reactivation of political engagement between viewpoints. We face a frightening prospect of growing societal divisions without the concomitant compulsion for mutual engagement to act out conflict as disagreement. (Marres, 2023, p 989)

Indeed, the earlier scholarly assumption that being jointly and antagonistically entangled in an issue would compel mutual engagement, obliging actors to find a collective way out, does not seem to hold. Maybe it does not hold any more, or perhaps it has never been fully tenable.

What makes me doubt that this assumption has ever been fully tenable is that it seems to imply a level playing field, or, at least, an absence of significant power inequalities. In a situation in which significant power inequalities are absent, it is easy to imagine how an issue obliges engagement between mutually challenging viewpoints caught up in it. But where the public and

an ecology of participatory formats it co-develops together are criss-crossed by drastic power differentials, as is the case in this book, then open political engagement is not only not obligatory, but for the endangered groupings it could be a nonsensically risky way to act. By avoiding direct engagement, and doing instead what amounts to stealthily solidifying and grounding an alternative version of the world, the contentious volunteer initiatives described in this book give their alternative a chance to strengthen and mature enough for political engagement to become a possibility in the future.

In this sense, that groupings within the public described in this book assemble their incompatible versions of the world and pull them as far away as possible may not be too problematic in itself. They are a divided public; they strive to have as little in common with each other as possible. They do not engage in the progressive composition of a common world, to use the fundamental definition of politics by Bruno Latour. Instead, what they do makes a world in common less common. But doing this is just as political because it protects the emergence of an alternative that holds the promise of a more peaceful future.

Ambivalence of digital media: Telegram as fluid technology

What can the stories of the wartime volunteer initiatives in Russia tell us about digital media? For a start, these stories make the ambivalence of digital media starkly apparent. This ambivalence is especially vivid when two widely debated dichotomies are considered. One dichotomy can be discerned in the scholarly and popular comments which highlight either the democratizing and liberating potential of digital media on the one hand, or their anti-democratic and oppressive potential on the other. Many have argued that digital media make it easier for people to learn about political matters, and to mobilize their engagement in political activities, such as voting and protesting, thus strengthening democracy. In non-democratic settings, digital media promise an alternative to mainstream media controlled by the authorities, thus strengthening citizens' capabilities for dissent. In the debates about the implications of digital media for society, these arguments tend to be countered with their opposites. It is often brought up that digital media facilitate the spread of misinformation, and decrease the active seeking-out of information, facilitating mistrust in democratic institutions and political apathy, which both negatively affect democracy. The liberating potential of digital media can be undermined through its manipulation and co-optation by authoritarian actors. Moreover, the opaque algorithmic architecture frequently problematized in discussions of large social media platforms as exerting invisible control over what users are exposed to has been suggested to be anything but liberating.

The digitally mediated practices of the volunteer collectives discussed in this book illustrate a point that is increasingly made by critical digital studies scholars regarding the dichotomy sketched in the previous paragraph: that digital media are neither inherently supportive nor undermining of democracy and freedom. What these media actually do varies a great deal and, cumulatively, does not clearly lean one way or the other. For example, a recent review of nearly 500 studies that examined the relations between digital media and democracy suggests that the effects of digital media differ widely, to a large extent depending on what the authors term ‘political context’:

[M]ost beneficial effects on democracy were found in emerging democracies in South America, Africa and South Asia. Mixed effects, by contrast, were distributed across Europe, the United States, Russia and China. Similarly, detrimental outcomes were mainly found in Europe, the United States and partly Russia, although this may reflect a lack of studies undertaken in authoritarian contexts. (Lorenz-Spreen et al, 2022, p 80)

What this book adds to the picture painted by the existing scholarship is an indication of the sheer depth of digital media’s ambivalence, even within the same political context. All of the volunteer collectives described in this book are based in the same country – Russia. They all rely primarily on the same digital medium for their work – Telegram. Even the work all of them do is about providing assistance to people from Ukraine in Russia. And yet, some digitally mediated volunteer practices mount resistance to the authoritarian state, while others deepen the state’s reach and oppressive capabilities.

Another dichotomy discernible in the debates on digital media and society is between digital media’s potential to facilitate societal cohesion, and its potential to drive societal divisions. The latter tends to receive more emphasis in discussions centred on general concerns over the state of democracy. It is gravely dangerous for a democratic society, the argument goes, when citizens’ exposure is increasingly limited to the news and perspectives that align with the views they already hold. This danger is brought about by a combination of the ever-growing choice of topics and viewpoints available online and selectively presented by digital media algorithms, and the decreasing importance of general-interest mass media that would facilitate exposure to a diversity of opinions. What we could be seeing as a result, is polarization, and even radicalization, neither of which is the least bit conducive for developing the mutual understanding necessary for solving collective problems in highly diverse societies. The former part of the dichotomy, that digital media has the potential to facilitate societal cohesion – has received more attention in topical discussions around, for

example, disability rights and patient movements. With the ascent of digital media, it has become easier for disadvantaged and unheard members of society to connect with one another and to make visible their life struggles, thus potentially increasing the inclusiveness and responsiveness of society.

As with the previously discussed dichotomy, the digitally mediated work of the volunteer collectives described in this book vividly illustrates the ambivalence of digital media, in so far as it is neither expressly connective nor divisive as such. Instead, these media may open unprecedented avenues for both effects simultaneously. Digital media, chiefly Telegram, helped piece together scattered and disheartened individuals into a large, networked, anti-war collective capable of taking large-scale action which contributes to the possibility of a more peaceful future. These same digital media helped delineate and make painfully obvious the irreconcilable divisions between the commitments of this network and what appears to be its twin, which has polar opposite commitments. Thus, on the one hand, we can see digital media playing an important part in weaving the fabric of society; on the other hand, we can see them partaking in tearing society apart. To add further nuance to the ambivalence of digital media, at this point one might ask whether a digitally exacerbated lack of cohesion is always necessarily a negative development, particularly where it accompanies the emergence of an alternative to an oppressive authoritarian order? Perhaps the only answer that can be formulated with a view to having some degree of general relevance, beyond the specific situation described in this book, would be: 'it depends'.

The aforementioned picture of ambivalence where digital media could have any number of effects and be involved in collective efforts to address any number of concerns, may give an impression of digital media's instrumentality. Digital media may seem like tools, the capacities of which are simply being employed by users to pursue their own diverse ends. But this is not exactly the case. Although digital media technologies do not determine their uses, neither do collective goals determine what is achievable with the involvement of digital media. To make sense of this ambivalence, I return to the idea of relational affordances introduced at the very beginning of this book (see Introduction) as a way of thinking about digital media. This idea highlights that although digital media do not appear to have stable properties that uniformly produce and constrain practices across different situations, this does not mean that users are free to do whatever they like with digital media. Instead, we are invited to consider the properties, or affordances, of digital media as something produced through the interactions between digital technologies and their users in specific situations (that is, adopting a practice-centric rather than platform-centric approach to analyse how the effects of digital media are produced). Put differently, digital technologies themselves do matter, but exactly how they matter is always configured (and reconfigured) in situated interactions between technologies and users. For

instance, in the previous chapters, we have seen that Telegram affords mass collaboration and distributed organization, but these are not features that belong to Telegram itself. Rather, these two affordances are co-produced by Telegram and its situated uses in volunteer work in Russia. In other situations, Telegram and its users may very well configure affordances differently.

Against this background, it would be possible to distinguish a more detailed list of Telegram's affordances produced within its situated uses described in this book. But it would perhaps be more important to note something about Telegram that does not directly matter for the specific practices of its use; rather it affects the quality of relations between this technology and its users. It is Telegram's fluidity. In saying 'fluidity' I am drawing on the seminal work by Marianne de Laet and Annemarie Mol (2000). de Laet and Mol investigate what makes a particular hand water pump called the Zimbabwe Bush Pump B-type an appropriate technology. They conclude that it is that the pump, as a technology, 'isn't too rigorously bounded ... doesn't impose itself but tries to serve ... is adaptable, flexible and responsive' (de Laet and Mol, 2000, p 225); in short it is appropriate as a result of its fluidity. The Zimbabwe Bush Pump B-type becomes appropriate and useful technology by having vague boundaries that shift along its different identities of a hydraulic system producing water, a sanitation device ensuring water safety, and a nation-building apparatus providing shared and cherished water infrastructure; by not forcing users to submit to its control over how it is employed; and by allowing users to substitute many of its components with alternative elements.

While de Laet and Mol analysed a hand water pump, not a digital technology, their analysis provides a heuristic to reflect on what makes Telegram an appropriate technology for the newly emerged ecology of volunteer initiatives described here. First, we can notice that Telegram is very open for users to tinker with. This openness extends far beyond basic customization options, such as making chats open or closed, and choosing between chats and broadcast channels. For example, Telegram makes it possible for users to access its free bot API and to create bots that can be employed to perform a wide variety of tasks and be integrated with external services. Furthermore, users are invited to use Telegram's API and source code to create their own Telegram apps. This openness makes Telegram highly adaptable and brings responsiveness into its relations with users. It also means that Telegram, like the hand water pump, is not firmly bounded. The possibilities for its integration with various external platforms, and for adding elements such as bots and other applications, mean that Telegram can extend to encompass, for example, the entire system of healthcare assistance developed by FP, or shrink to a single closed chat. The openness to tinkering and a lack of fixed boundaries highlight that Telegram does not attempt to force users into interacting with it in any particular way. Of

course, there are still impossibilities – no digital technology can facilitate absolutely everything – but Telegram explicitly abandons strict control over how exactly users deal with it, making relations between this technology and its users highly flexible. I suggest that it is this responsiveness and flexibility in its relations with users that make Telegram an appropriate and useful technology for the volunteer collectives described in this book.

Scholarly and popular discussions of Telegram have largely focused on its anonymity and security. Seeing Telegram embroiled in the work of various activist groups at risk of prosecution has prompted commentators to debate to what extent Telegram in fact delivers on its promises of secure communication (Ermoshina and Musiani, 2021; Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). But the importance of security notwithstanding, it is not security, actual or hoped-for in response to the Telegram's promises, that has made Telegram central for the volunteers in this book; it is its fluidity, and its corresponding responsive and flexible relations with users.

It is, therefore, not entirely an accident that, among all the generally ambivalent digital technologies, it is specifically Telegram that has become so central to the work of the Russian volunteer initiatives. Its fluidity and the lack of control in its relations with users matter. In this sense, we can think of Telegram as an actor in the networks that arrange transportation, facilitate medical help, and provide humanitarian aid. As doing all of these things constitutes participation in addressing collective concerns over the issue of the war, Telegram is an actor involved both in mounting resistance to the authoritarian state and in extending the aggressive expansionist politics of the very same state. When I say that Telegram is an actor, I do not mean that it is an actor in its own right. It acquires its 'actorness' through being a part of these networks, with its capacity to act being produced together by the various humans and nonhumans that constitute these networks. In this sense, although Telegram and other digital media are extremely potent technologies, they are simultaneously rather mundane, as the agency that they appear to possess does not come solely from them but is being a continuous outcome of myriad sociomaterial interactions between them and their users in specific situations.

APPENDIX

Ethical and Methodological Questions

In this appendix, I describe the ‘backstage’ of the research the book is based on. Methodology and ethics sections in academic articles tend to be rather impersonal, focusing on approaches and techniques used and bracketing, also out of necessity to stay within strict word limits imposed by the article format, researchers’ trials and tribulations that often factor in the research decisions being made. I would like to use the freedom afforded by the book format to discuss my approaches and techniques as a part of the wider – somewhat turbulent – story of doing this research.

This kind of writing about research methodology and ethics allows the researcher’s – my – role and decisions to be described in a way that seeks to be humble and realistic. Because of their usual impersonality, methodology sections tend to give a picture of researchers who are, if not omnipotent, then, at least, in full control of their research: they plan and execute, all the while ensuring rigour. This appendix paints a different picture. It is of a researcher striving to act with integrity and to conduct robust research, while struggling through institutional roadblocks and continuously shifting, troubling circumstances.

The research reported in this book comes from a larger project titled ‘Public participation by other means? Informal practices to engage with matters of collective concern in nondemocratic settings.’ I wrote the proposal for this project in 2019, it was awarded funding from the European Research Council (ERC) in 2020, and given the green light to start in early 2021. The project aimed to study instances of public participation that proceeds despite being restricted or outright unwelcome. As you can imagine, originally it did not include a study of the wartime volunteer initiatives in Russia because the initiatives described in this book did not exist when the project was conceived.

The original project was based on four studies. The first three – one exploring how Russian patient organizations work with the state; the

second looking into how patient engagement in drug development is being standardized by the global pharmaceutical industry; and the third looking at how marginalized communities who lack access to adequate healthcare come to produce their own do-it-yourself (DIY) medicines – were carried out. Fieldwork for the fourth study, about how patients in Russia counteract drug shortages, was scheduled to start in spring 2022, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 made proceeding with this plan impossible. Not only did both, my university and the funder instantly prohibit work-related travel to Russia, but also I could not, in good conscience, suggest to the PhD student responsible for this study that she should travel to Russia in the current circumstances. The postdoctoral researcher conducting fieldwork for the first study, about Russian patient organizations, had to immediately leave the country, but the bulk of data generation was complete and he was able to finalize the study remotely.

The fourth study was put on hold for the time being, also because as a principal investigator, I was unable to focus on my research. I was trying to understand what, as a Russian citizen living abroad, I could and should be doing, while caring for my daughter who was born three weeks after the full-scale invasion began. I noticed the early social media mentions of Russian volunteers striving to assist Ukrainian refugees, and I joined Telegram chats of several of them. For several weeks I engaged with these initiatives by picking up odd tasks posted in chats, which usually involved ordering supplies or donating money. My research interest grew as I began to appreciate the scale of the volunteer initiatives, and I became curious about how so many people, most of whom had not previously known of one another's existence, manage to do things together.

By May 2022, I had decided to replace my planned fourth study with a study of wartime volunteer initiatives in Russia and conduct it myself. The volunteers' engagement in providing healthcare assistance brought their work within the overall focus of the project on the domain of health. Above all, I thought that if we are to learn more about how collective action becomes possible in oppressive environments nowadays, this is the case to learn from. Feeling it was urgent to begin the study when novel, dispersed but stably functioning collectivities were forming in real time, I prepared submissions to several Research Ethics Committees (RECs). The study and the project as a whole were subject to several 'institutional jurisdictions', hence the approval of more than one REC was required. I ended up having a protracted disagreement with one of the RECs, which I can appreciate with hindsight pushed me to sharpen and substantiate my arguments about what ethical research conduct would entail in projects such as this one. During my exchange with the REC, I formulated several core points, detailed in the following sections, which informed my efforts to conduct my research in a responsible and ethical manner. Overall, I would like the following

account of my dialogue with the REC to provide an illustration of some general and, in my view, problematic trends in science governance and the ethical oversight of qualitative social science research.

Ethics

Frictions already emerged at the stage of initial ethical review of the entire project, after it was approved for funding. Somewhat to my surprise, my suggestion to forgo written informed consent did not meet much resistance. I suggested to consider doing this only in situations where the signed document would be the only link between the research participant and my research project, thus potentially being the basis for identifying the participants who would then be exposed to additional risks. My reasoning was accepted provided that I develop a script for orally conveying to participants key information about the study, why they were being asked to participate, the research team and our institution, the anticipated risks and benefits of participation, and the option to stop their participation at any time.

Vulnerability as a situationally constructed characteristic and process-oriented ethics

But the REC's perspective on vulnerability diverged considerably from my own. The REC noted that vulnerable individuals and groups would be involved in the project, and asked me to detail my measures to prevent the risk of enhancing their vulnerability. From our subsequent correspondence it transpired that the REC appeared to be thinking of vulnerability in categorical terms, meaning that specific categories of people, such as people living with HIV/AIDs, injecting drug users, and undocumented migrants, are considered vulnerable by definition. My task was to identify which categories of vulnerable people might be involved in my research, and to detail measures to mitigate the risk of enhancing their vulnerability, per category. Perhaps somewhat unstrategically, I resisted this framing of vulnerability, and a tick-box approach to research ethics associated with it. It seemed unrealistic and also patronizing to think of vulnerability as a given characteristic of certain categories of people. I could understand the appeal of such a view, though, as it enables RECs to take ready-made ethical frameworks and apply them to a research project prior to its commencement, checking that the researcher determined whether vulnerable people were going to be involved in the research; ascertained who these were; and listed measures to protect participants according to specific kinds of vulnerability they had – that is, ticked all the boxes before setting foot in the field. Given that RECs conduct their reviews before research starts and rarely have resources to deeply engage with the research as it proceeds, apart from

periodically requesting updates, preference for categorical understanding of vulnerability makes sense. It makes the ethical review doable.

However, as I tried arguing in response, empirical research into vulnerability and ethics in practice has shown that vulnerability is better understood not as a once-and-for-all predefined set of categories but rather as a situationally constructed characteristic (Levine et al, 2004; Luna, 2009). Moreover, given my project's focus on the agency of people who act in situations in which their participation is discouraged, I did not want to be in danger of patronizing individuals or sectors of society who wish to be seen as 'strong enough' and to make their own decisions about their presumed vulnerability. Consequently, I proposed an alternative approach to the REC, which focused on two strategies. The first strategy was to maintain confidentiality by striving to ensure that the collection, analysis, and reporting of data would proceed without compromising the identities of research participants. The second strategy was to partner with research participants, by including them in my research planning and analysis, and discussing the dissemination of results with them. The rationale for the second strategy was that it is not only the risk of personal identification that must be mitigated against but also the potential for those in positions of power to interfere with the participants and their arrangements. Acknowledging that people who participate in my research have deep understanding of the environment in which they operate and an insight into the power dynamics at play, I stressed that it is very important to check against multiple perspectives, not just my own and REC's, how research can proceed and how its results can be presented so that possibilities of making participants (more) vulnerable are minimized.

I was arguing for an approach to understanding vulnerability that veers away from a tick-box approach to ethics, towards what can be called process-oriented ethics, which has long been advocated specifically for the ethics oversight of qualitative social sciences. The importance of a process-oriented approach is highlighted, among others by the European Commission's report on Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology: 'Above all ethical review must recognise that ethical decision making is not a static, one-off exercise. Only the field researcher truly confronts the unanticipated aspects of research as it occurs spontaneously, while the project is ongoing' (Iphofen, 2021, p 3).

While the report focuses specifically on ethnographic research in anthropology, its recommendations are relevant more broadly for qualitative social science research that involves in-depth engagement with different worlds, and proceeds amid dynamics about which not much is known. In my case, a process-based approach to dealing with vulnerability involved building into the project continuous and collective reflection on whether any participants are being made any more vulnerable by their involvement. In my discussion with the REC, I argued that such continuous reflection

prevents overlooking sources of vulnerability and allows me to be flexible and thus more effective at protecting participants.

Unexpected findings and the ethics-first approach to confidentiality

Another point of contention during the initial ethical review was the unexpected findings policy. The REC wanted me to develop a disclosure policy for dealing with such findings. The problem was that the only policy for dealing with such findings I was willing to develop was one for non-disclosure.

Ethical discussions on unexpected findings were initially focused on biomedical research. In addition to the main findings, which answer the scientific question that has been posed, biomedical research often results in incidental findings related to the health condition of participants. For example, researchers might notice a tumour or other irregularity, which a research participant is not yet aware of. In biomedical research, such unexpected findings are a by-product of the research, and ethical questions here are concerned with the extent to which researchers are obliged to disclose these findings to participants, particularly where the clinical meaning of the findings is unclear, or where adequate follow-up care is not guaranteed.

Subsequently, as social science research has increasingly come under the purview of RECs, the term ‘unexpected findings’ has acquired an additional meaning. When it is not a biomedical but social science research that is being reviewed, the term refers to learning about unlawful behaviour, which is to be disclosed to the relevant authorities. Reading that I was asked to develop a disclosure policy for such findings rang multiple alarm bells in my head. One of my project studies was about to engage with people who produced their own pharmaceuticals, while another of the initially planned studies concerned people with restricted access to healthcare trying everything possible to ensure the continuous supply of crucial medicines. Given that both studies zoomed in on practices that extend into a legal grey area, it was very likely that sooner or later my team would encounter something illegal. How could we possibly approach our potential participants knowing that we would need to inform ‘relevant authorities’ of their efforts to survive should these be illegal? And who would agree to talk to us once we had informed them about our disclosure policy?

So, I took a breath and throughout our subsequent exchange with the REC, tried to justify my unwillingness to disclose anything short of the immediate threat of serious harm. In the debate about what kind of confidentiality guarantee a researcher is allowed to give to participants in view of the possibility that disclosure of confidential research information might be demanded by the courts or other authorities, the REC appeared to firmly adhere to the ‘law first’ side. Proponents of the law-first view subjugate ethics to the law because,

well, the ethical way of acting would be to obey the law (Lowman and Palys, 2014) when it comes to the issue of confidentiality and beyond. On another side of this debate is the ‘ethics-first’ position, I strove to maintain. In relation to confidentiality it can be summarized as follows: researchers are ethically obliged to be aware of the relevant laws, and with this awareness to make an ethical decision about the degree of confidentiality they are prepared to promise and then sticking to this decision no matter what. There are a number of arguments to support this position, including the far-reaching consequences of disclosure for all research on so-called sensitive topics: if researchers cannot commit to maintaining confidentiality such research would be impossible. Or, more accurately, it would be possible but in a rather monstrous form, as depicted by Dingwall (2008: 10):

When we give up doing participant observation with vulnerable or socially marginal groups because of ... regulatory obstacles, then a society becomes less well-informed about the condition of those who it excludes and more susceptible to their explosions of discontent. How helpful is it when the only ethnographers of Islamic youth in the UK are undercover police or security service agents?

Consequently, as Lowman and Palys (2014, p 99) argue: ‘researchers must resist being co-opted as agents of the state lest the state become the sole producer of knowledge about crime and other sensitive topics’. I firmly subscribe to this point of view. Additionally, half of the studies in my research project were located in Russia, which is infamous for its discriminatory and oppressive laws, such as what came to be commonly known as anti-LGBT law. Disclosing participants’ practices that violate this and other dubious laws would constitute a lawful but highly unethical act.

I tried limiting my description of how the project would deal with unexpected findings to a general statement on the ethics-first approach. But after being pressed by the REC I just wrote that the project policy is not to disclose anything, unless there is a threat of serious immediate harm involved. In practice, this meant that if anyone on my research team should learn that there is an assault happening, we would certainly call the police; and coming across such information in the course of our research activities was about as unlikely to happen as it was in our everyday lives. By the time my conversation with the REC reached this point, our correspondence ran to 111 pages and had lasted for several months. After one more month, I was informed that I could start the research, which I assumed meant that the REC still disagreed with my approach but did not find it egregious enough to continue our back-and-forth.

While I was happy that I could begin work on the project, this discussion about unexpected findings made me realize just how unprotected researchers

are. While preparing my responses to the REC, I came across cases of social scientists receiving subpoenas to disclose confidential research information (Lowman and Palys, 2014), becoming involved in litigation, and even going to jail (Scarce, 1995), in each case receiving little to no support from their research institutions. With RECs in many countries increasingly pushing for limited confidentiality – that is, confidentiality respected only until an authority asks for the confidential research data – there are no institutional structures left to enable research into troubling, marginal, murky situations that social science has long dealt with. The story of the assisted suicide researcher, Russel Ogden, who was abandoned, first by his university in Canada, and then by his university in the UK, when it came to maintaining confidentiality and protecting his research participants, is illustrative in this regard. It seems that all the weight of ensuring that research into sensitive topics, of crucial importance for society, can proceed, and that academic freedom is protected, falls on the shoulders of a few individual researchers who are willing to take the risks (Garrett, 2014). It is the researcher who, if willing to promise full confidentiality to their participants, must keep, care for, and control the data, because a university might turn the data over to authorities when requested to do so. It is the researcher who must destroy all data with identifying details, keeping only fully anonymized transcripts and notes, to prevent the data from being seized – police are authorized to use force when executing a search warrant – and in destroying that original data risk being accused of compromising the quality of the research. And it is the researcher who must have the strength and suitable personal circumstances (such as not being a solo parent with young children) to follow through on their promises to protect their participants, including risking the possibility of being imprisoned. While the latter prospect is remote, since it is still quite rare for researchers to be requested to divulge their confidential research data, any researcher promising full confidentiality to research participants who might share legally sensitive data must keep this in mind.

I must admit that, on realizing all this, I did take several self-censoring steps. For example, the study of DIY pharmaceuticals involved a community of transgender activists who produce their own hormones to assist with transition. The hormones produced could be oestrogen for feminizing therapy, or testosterone for masculinizing therapy, depending on the type of transition attempted. While both hormones require a prescription, in many countries, testosterone is a controlled substance subject to very stringent regulation owing to it being a potential drug of abuse, whereas oestrogen is not. Producing a controlled substance, even for one's own use, is a punishable offence; producing, and in many cases sharing, prescription medicines that do not have the status of a controlled substance is not. Consequently, studying practices related to DIY testosterone was much more likely to bring me and the PhD student responsible for this study into contact with some form of

law enforcement, than studying practices related to DIY oestrogen. And while separating the two in a research project felt quite artificial, I decided that it would be better for us not to know anything about testosterone. There were no scientific reasons for this decision, nor, in my view, any ethical ones; rather, despite my bold statements to the REC, I was unsure about my ability to maintain my ‘ethics-first’ posture under real pressure from the authorities, should the situation arise. There was also a PhD student to consider, whose job description did not include an item about willingness to do anything to protect research participants’ confidentiality.

Although I felt that I had covered the necessary ethics bases in preparation for carrying out my project as it was initially planned, the new case of wartime volunteers in Russia put all of the previously mentioned concerns, and many more, back on the table.

Dealing with emergent and uncontrollable risks

The decision to change one of the planned studies in my project required me to contact a number of RECs again. And so the earlier discussion with one of the RECs continued. This time around, the interaction was much more intense and bruising for me. By coincidence, as I was beginning work on this part of the text, I received a notification from the REC in question to provide an update on the ‘ethics status’ of the study about wartime volunteers. I was surprised to notice how my hands began shaking slightly when I saw the sender’s name appear in my inbox. I immediately recalled the stress of trying to start a study into how unformalized, distributed participation works under repressive conditions and being not allowed to do so until I made the study entirely risk-free, with time, all the while, to capture rapidly evolving processes, running out.

In preparing my ethics submission for the study of wartime volunteers in Russia, I generally drew on the same two major approaches as for the rest of the project: ensuring confidentiality and partnering with participants, but deepened them significantly. In terms of confidentiality, I proposed to make every effort to collect as little identifying information as possible, and to erase identifying information I did collect afterwards, as far as I could. Measures to ensure this with regards to interview data, for instance, included obtaining oral instead of written informed consent; asking participants to try to avoid mentioning the names or addresses of individuals and initiatives during recorded interviews; transcribing interviews myself and deleting any identifying details that still got in; and saving transcripts as files with random numbers as names. The interviews were to be recorded with a very simple recording device, without the function of connecting to any network; recordings were to be deleted after transcription; and transcripts were to be saved on an encrypted external hard drive, to be securely stored afterwards. In terms of partnering with participants, I proposed to follow their own

security rules. Many volunteer initiatives have rules in place for their own protection, which, I discovered during my fieldwork, are very well thought through and based on a deep understanding of the intricacies of their situation that an outsider like me could not have attained on their own. I planned to discuss with participants what could be mentioned in the project outputs, and what would be better kept between us (and deleted from the transcript, if it was a recorded interview). This proved a suitable strategy because the volunteers' keen awareness not only of the local legislation that applied to their operation but also of practices of enforcing the legal rules, powerfully complemented my intuitions regarding what information was more or less safe to publicize. I further planned to share a preliminary description of the findings in Russian with participants, as yet another check of whether something they would consider too risky remained in the text. All of these measures were meant to mitigate the risk of my research participants being identified, and the risk of interference from those in positions of power over the participants and their arrangements. These measures would not completely erase the risks, also considering that in all likelihood state agents were monitoring the volunteer chats, at least their public part, anyway. But I considered the measures to be adequate, given that their continuous character and engagement with local insights enabled staying attuned to the evolving situation in the field and alert to novel issues that might emerge.

The REC, however, was not satisfied with how I proposed to deal with the risks this study poses. This dissatisfaction, as I understand it, stemmed from two convictions, very much in line with the tick-box approach to ethics review: that risks are knowable and manageable in advance, and that risky research is ethically permissible only if it can be made risk-free. The communication was worded quite strongly. In the REC's view I had not demonstrated a 'high degree of reflexivity' indicative of which was the lack of a detailed risk assessment that would identify, assess, and mitigate specific risks associated with the project. Instead of compiling, again prior to the beginning of fieldwork, a list of specific risks with an indication of their likelihood and another sublist of mitigation measures attached to each, I delineated an ongoing process- and collaboration-based approach. Apart from leaving a lot of space for dealing with unexpected, situation-specific risks as they emerge and become clear throughout the research, another particular weakness of this approach, for the REC, was that it did not attempt to manage risks that could not be managed. For example, it was repeatedly pointed out to me that, given the topic of the study, there was a risk of research staff, me in this case, or my institution being targeted by Russian security forces. Said forces may attempt to exert pressure remotely via online methods or indirectly via, say, family members in Russia. The REC wanted me to clarify how any change in the nature or level of such risks would be monitored throughout the study. I had no answer for them. While, indeed,

such risks are not unthinkable and it would certainly be helpful to know what Russian security forces are up to, such level of insight lies far beyond my reach and the reach of anyone who would wish to do this research.

Apart from wanting me to control all kinds of risks, including those that to me appeared uncontrollable, the REC seemed to be very concerned that the research was risky at all. For example, I was planning to contact my participants via Telegram – the medium of volunteer initiatives’ operation – and use Telegram’s ‘secret chat’ option to share basic information about my contact request, such as information about me and the project, including a link to the project website, my university, and the funder, after which communication could remain in Telegram or move elsewhere, depending on the participants’ preferences. The ‘secret chat’ option was proposed because it meant that messages exchanged via this chat were irreversibly destroyed after a specified period of time. The REC was concerned about this plan because providing a participant with a link to the project website potentially created a risk for both sides of the exchange, should third parties gain access to the information (for example, through searching browsing histories). I was asked to explain how I would assess and mitigate any such risks. The REC, it seemed, was pushing me to, at least on paper, describe how I was going to make my study risk-free. All risks were to be mitigated or, better still, done away with, as indicated by questions like (emphasis added): ‘how will findings be described and disseminated in ways that *do not cause risk* to the participants?’ Finally, the REC pointed to a category of risks that I thought could not be a part of ethical research oversight at all. This category was reputational risks that my university and my funder faced owing to, as the REC asserted, the sensitive nature of my research.

Support of my colleagues was a major factor in that I managed to continue this exchange. They read through its mounting pages, toned down my responses, and helped me think through details of my approach to conducting this study. In the end, the REC demanded that, before any research activity could commence, I must develop a systematic risk register that would include all the risks identified in our prior communications. The register was to be regularly reviewed and updated throughout the study; other involved RECs must receive this register too and re-approve the study in light of the specific risks identified. In response, I defended my approach that started from realistically admitting that this research cannot be made risk-free. It was a robust approach though, I argued, because it was suitable specifically for a qualitative social science study intended to grasp a complex situation about which little is known; it went beyond bureaucratic measures that do little to protect research participants, their communities, or researchers; and it took research participants, their knowledge, and their concerns seriously. It was together with my research participants that I proposed to search for a balance between the risks that this research poses and the societal benefits

it would bring, including gaining critical knowledge about the persistence of solidarity and grassroots agency in the face of adverse circumstances, and highlighting that injustice and violence do meet resistance. By this point, I felt I had nothing to lose, so I took a jab at the REC's concern about 'reputational risks' as well, suggesting that this label produces a covert but potent form of censorship that channels research into 'safe topics', divorced from the topics that fuel controversies worldwide. It is less visible in comparison to direct prohibitions to study X or Y, but equally impactful in discouraging certain kinds of research by subjecting it to impossible bureaucratic requirements.

I do not think my diatribes would have made any difference to the REC's position, but to my last response I attached support letters from two ethics professors who recommended that the REC allow me to proceed, and to whom I am enormously grateful for taking this step on my behalf. After several weeks, I was informed that I could proceed with the study. No risk registers were mentioned.

Now that the study is nearly complete, and my project is in its final year, I am wondering whether I was right in how I handled my disagreements with the REC. After all, my pages of text made no difference: a request for an update on the 'ethics status' of the study I received recently from the REC contained the same questions, like how the risk was mitigated that members of the research team might come under direct or indirect pressure to provide information to Russian authorities. In a way this is not even too surprising because there have been volumes of scholarship on ethics of qualitative social science research arguing against a tick-box bureaucratized approaches to ethical oversight (Bosk and de Vries, 2004; Boden et al, 2009; Librett and Perrone, 2010). Researchers have shown that these approaches, among others, 'transpose institutional fears of liability onto individual researchers; ... create conflicts among formal requirements, academic freedom and respect for local ethics; and ... deny agency to informants' (Herzfeld, 2023, p 3). RECs overwhelmingly relying on such approaches, and focusing squarely on risk management and litigation, were shown to be 'unable to accurately conceptualize the risks or benefits of these [qualitative social science] projects and, in fact, complicate qualitative research and introduce new risks or threats' (Opsal et al, 2016, p 1138). Multiple scholarly contributions over the years have called for 'an alternative system that better accommodates the ethical complexities of social research, advocating for a more tailored approach that respects disciplinary methodologies and fosters genuine ethical engagement' (Shore, 2024, p 8). All of these meticulously built and carefully illustrated critiques have not made a dent in the prevailing system of ethical oversight. I now feel that it was rather naïve of me to think that the REC's position could somehow be moved by my arguments, which leaves me unsure of how to proceed the next time there is a clash between my qualitative research and the ethical frameworks of a REC. If anyone with

similar experiences or concerns would like to think together about how we as individual researchers, and our field of enquiry collectively, can proceed given the apparent immutability of the current system of ethical oversight, please do get in touch with me.

Methodology

Pre-research stage

I began engaging with volunteer initiatives that aimed to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia in spring 2022. As I have mentioned previously, my initial engagement was motivated by personal rather than scientific reasons. However, during this initial period I accumulated impressions of the different initiatives and their interconnections, which was helpful later for planning a more systematic enquiry. For instance, during this pre-research phase I came across two initiatives that would soon become major nodes in the emerging ecosystem of volunteer initiatives, and would occupy a central place in this book – the ones I call here *On the Move* and *For Patients (FP)*. I followed links to their Telegram chats which appeared in my Facebook feed, and joined both groups.

A host of questions immediately sprang to mind upon entering these chats: who were these people? Who created these chats? Who was coming up with their work formats? Who financed them? For several days I closely observed the chats, reading the pinned posts and scrolling back through messages, trying to figure out the answers. In the process, I noted recurrent posters and paid particular attention to messages on initiatives' operation such as offers to use particular hashtags to make navigating chats easier or suggestions on how to technically organize collection of requests for assistance. It soon became apparent that there were no formal organizations or stable, pre-existing groups of any kind behind the chats. The work formats were being shaped in a bottom-up way, and most posters addressed other group members in a manner that suggested they were only acquainted virtually, through the chat.

Being thus assured that *On the Move* and *FP* were genuine grassroots volunteer initiatives, and somewhat surprised by this given their size and increasingly coordinated manner of operation, I started looking for ways to contribute to their efforts. Many of the tasks posted in *On the Move*, like ordering a food package or transferring money to cover transportation or other costs, could be completed remotely and did not require specific expertise, so I was able to pick up a task every now and then, provided I was quick (during the initial months of *On the Move*'s existence, many tasks were taken in a moment). Contributing to the operations of *FP* was more challenging, given the initiative's focus on providing advice on dealing with health problems and navigating the Russian healthcare system, which required expertise and

contacts I did not possess. So, I just remained in the chat, following the attempts of medical professionals to provide assistance to those who requested it.

Gradually I started noticing how these two initiatives were becoming linked to each other and to multiple others. Some of these other initiatives were newly formed and dedicated to assisting people from Ukraine while in Russia: there were ones specialized, among others, in legal assistance, supplying clothes and other essentials, and purchasing train and plane tickets. Location-focused initiatives were also emerging, striving to provide assistance in a specific region, city, or PVR (state centres for temporary accommodation). Other initiatives pre-dated the war, such as NGOs that initiated fundraisers specifically for refugees, and medicines-sharing chats, where it was possible to find costly or otherwise difficult to obtain medicines some refugees needed for free. Where suitable, volunteers began referring people requesting assistance to some of these other initiatives. For instance, doctors consulting in FP started referring patients to medicines-sharing chats, while On the Move volunteers started referring people to FP for medical advice and to local initiatives for daily necessities. Some initiatives established direct collaborations; for example, On the Move volunteers started working directly with an initiative that purchased travel tickets and, instead of referring people from Ukraine to this initiative, started planning the transportation routes themselves, reimbursing part of the tickets via this initiative. Smaller, specialist initiatives emerged as offshoots supporting the operation of the larger initiatives; for example, On the Move soon was accompanied by chats of drivers in several different locations, who took on short-distance transportation tasks using their own vehicles.

I followed all of these leads and began exploring other initiatives by reading their Telegram chats, other social media, and specially produced materials such as how-to guides. Building a picture of the diverse modes of operation and wide networked connections across different initiatives led me to thinking of them together as a developing ecosystem, intriguing in its rapid self-organization and steady, collectively negotiated functioning. On the basis of these preliminary insights, I developed my research strategy, which can be described as a qualitative ethnographically inspired study. It is ethnographically inspired in the sense of having a keen interest in how people within a research situation being explored themselves experience and make sense of things and of using one's self as the instrument of knowing throughout a prolonged engagement with the situation – in my case, more than a year of intensive research with follow-up monitoring that is still ongoing.

Data generation

Non-patriotic initiatives

Initially during the actual research stage, I set out to broadly probe into the wartime volunteer initiatives' ecosystem. My pre-research engagements with

the field alerted me to the diversity of ways in which these novel initiatives worked, organized themselves, and related to other initiatives. I focused on grasping this diversity and mapping the lines along which I could make sense of it. I did not intend to exhaustively map the ecosystem, first because such a map would become outdated the moment it was drawn, given how the initiatives merged, sprouted offshoots, transformed, popped up and occasionally disappeared quickly. Second, a static map, perhaps, was not the best means of representing the fluid world of wartime volunteer initiatives, who were striving to come up with responses to a widening array of tragic situations amid intensifying oppression.

Therefore, I selected a broad range of initiatives aiming to assist people from Ukraine while in Russia to follow, aiming to understand the dynamics of self-organization and collaboration within the larger ecology that they formed together. All of these initiatives had emerged post-24 February 2022 (while a few pre-existing organizations, mostly NGOs, did open dedicated assistance lines, the overwhelming majority of assistance initiatives were new and did not have any organizational backing). I somewhat arbitrarily organized the initiatives I selected into three groups to structure my enquiry: (i) individual volunteers; (ii) country-wide group volunteer initiatives; and (iii) local group initiatives. While the initiatives within each of my three categories provided many different types of assistance, I was satisfied that whether they were of a group or individual kind, and whether they focused on a specific location or worked across Russia, appeared to have an impact on their modes of operation, which made my grouping reasonable. Within the individual volunteer category, I only looked at those who worked across Russia (within internationally recognized borders), with one volunteer also arranging evacuations from the occupied territories and zones of active warfare. There were individual volunteers who worked on a local scale, but their mode of operation typically consisted of connecting to one or two individuals or families from Ukraine remaining in Russia for the time being, and trying to arrange support for them. As such, they were barely visible, although I did manage to speak with two such volunteers later while conducting interviews.

First, I focused my data generation on individual volunteers – one-person initiatives that undertook to provide assistance to specific individuals and families, and tended to use social media to collect resources for this purpose. These individuals did not work completely alone; they collaborated with larger initiatives by taking on and referring cases, and usually amassed a support group via their social media presence, the members of which could be called on to perform tasks like driving a dog to a vet for vaccinations necessary to enter the EU. What made them ‘individual’ for the purposes of my categorization was that they themselves, individually, decided on the kind of assistance they could provide and the format for doing so, and were

solely responsible for coordinating assistance in the cases they took on. For this group, I focused on five volunteers who were among the most active on social media, and, based on their online activity and mentions by other volunteer initiatives, appeared to be among the most active in assistance provision. None of the five had a strict specialization and tried to find ways to assist in any way they could, including by making referrals to other groups. Two of these volunteers appear in this book as Vasilisa and Maria. Three of them used their personal Facebook pages to post about their volunteer work, and two started Telegram channels. I followed these Facebook pages and Telegram channels. The volunteers never shared names, addresses, or the exact locations of the people they worked with, but they did describe in general terms what was needed, why, and the outcomes of the situations they took on, occasionally with pictures, if permission to share such pictures was given. They also frequently mentioned other volunteers and initiatives who had contributed to arranging transportation, medical help, or other kinds of assistance in specific cases. I checked the Facebook pages daily and the Telegram channels whenever I received a notification that a new message had been posted, making notes on the situations the volunteers dealt with, the requests they made to their audience, and details of how they arranged assistance. At this stage, I did not save copies of the messages and posts, keeping only my own notes with quotations paraphrased in my own words and no mention of real Telegram handles or Facebook names.

Second, I focused on initiatives working across Russia. For this group I focused on six initiatives which appeared to be among those most actively and steadily functioning, based on social media activity and mentions by other volunteers, and which focused on different kinds of assistance. Two of these groups were On the Move and FP, both described in detail in this book. The four others were: an initiative to help people from Ukraine leave Russia, which originated in Russia but proceeded to operate mostly from abroad; a religious community that mostly took on medical evacuations and financing and arranging care for complex medical situations; an initiative specializing in providing legal advice; and an initiative that consisted of providing a platform for communication and mutual help among people from Ukraine in Russia. While these groups tended to work within the internationally recognized borders of Russia, two were also providing assistance (mostly with evacuations) in the occupied territories and zones of active warfare. All of these initiatives had a Telegram chat and/or channel, with chats allowing for discussions between participants, and channels making for more unidirectional communication through posts and announcements by channel admins. In addition, two of these initiatives had a website, while several individual representatives of the religious community were active on Facebook, posting updates on the initiative's work and needs there. I read the websites and regularly checked them for updates, checked the Facebook

pages daily, and checked Telegram chats and channels whenever I received a notification that a new message had been posted. I made notes on how the initiatives operated, including how they collected requests, how they coordinated their work, and how they related to other initiatives. I described examples of what they were able to do in specific cases, and made notes on the topics that came up in group discussions.

Third, I focused on local initiatives, which limit their operations to a specific territory. For this group I focused on six initiatives, selected, again, based on their level of activity and stability, but also based on the region where they were located. Because individual volunteers and country-wide initiatives tend to base their operations in major Russian cities, I looked for local initiatives based elsewhere. Two initiatives were dedicated to assisting residents in two different PVRs, in western and central regions of Russia; one initiative was working in a northern region, assisting one local PVR and those residing outside the PVR; one initiative, Medical Support, which is mentioned in this book, provided healthcare advice in a southern region; one initiative provided clothes and other essentials in a western region; and one initiative was comprised of car owners who made short trips for free within and around their city. The latter initiative was located in one of the major cities, but I included it because I could not find a similar initiative elsewhere. All of these initiatives had a Telegram channel or chat, which I checked whenever I received an update. I made notes about the kinds of issues the initiatives dealt with, how they organized their work, whether and how they collaborated with others, and what kinds of discussions, if any, took place among members.

I followed the 17 initiatives summarized in [Table 1](#) for about five months, during which time I was able to gain a deeper insight into the dynamics of the new volunteer ecology, and an understanding of specificities in the modes of operation of different initiatives. Moreover, I looked up other initiatives beyond these 17, and made notes on their focus and work practices. Some of these additional initiatives I found through mentions in the chats I was following closely; others I found by searching for assistance provision in specific regions. I did not study these additional initiatives systematically, but was mainly looking for anything in what they do and how they do it which was significantly different from what I had already encountered through following the 17 initiatives I focused on.

I did not see any significant differences until I came across the initiatives of the kind I call ‘patriotic’ in this book. The initiatives I had followed and looked up until then were either contentious or, at least, not celebratory of the Russian aggression, trying to do what they could to ameliorate the suffering being inflicted. The title of this section – ‘non-patriotic’ initiatives – is meant to account for this spectrum of positions between explicit contentiousness towards the state and a more apolitical humanitarian

Table 1: Overview of the initial data generation strategy

Initiative type	Number	Data
Individual volunteers	5	(3) Facebook posts (2) Telegram channel
Country-wide initiatives	6	(3) Telegram channel (4) Telegram chat (2) Website (1) Facebook posts
Local initiatives	6	(2) Telegram channel (4) Telegram chat

stance adopted by such initiatives. The patriotic initiatives were completely different from all of these. Their explicit pro-war stance produced more public work practices, which were openly supportive of and rejoicing at the state's military actions, with their efforts focused on settling refugees from Ukraine in Russia. They were so different from the initial scope of my interest, barely interacting with the rest of the volunteer ecosystem, that I decided to put them aside for the time being and return to them later.

Patriotic initiatives aside, I appeared to have reached a saturation of sorts, with more searching and observation revealing no significantly different types or modes of operation. Hence, I decided to narrow my focus to a few initiatives, and conduct interviews to explore these initiatives in more depth. I settled on the initiatives that were central to the volunteer ecosystem, owing to their scale and focus (the nation-wide initiatives *On the Move* and *FP*), or which were relatively typical of their kind (the individual volunteer whom I call *Vasilisa*, and the local PVR initiative that I call the *Another City chat*). By the time I started conducting interviews, I had been following three of these four initiatives for about five months (*On the Move*, *FP*, and *Vasilisa*). I included *Another City chat* in my in-depth exploration several months later, instead of the originally selected local PVR initiative, after being introduced to the group's volunteers by my interviewees. The reason for the change was that *Another City* was more geographically removed than my original choice from the major Russian cities, through which transit routes towards the EU for refugees from Ukraine typically passed. *Another City chat*, therefore, intersected less with *On the Move* in terms of the people involved and specificities of the situations that the volunteers addressed.

As I already knew who the admins and other actively involved figures in *On the Move* and *FP* were, I contacted several of them and *Vasilisa*. Somewhat to my surprise, all responded right away and were ready to talk to me. Although at this point, I travelled to Russia (for personal reasons – work travel covered by project funds was still prohibited), the interviews took place online,

predominantly via Telegram. Some of the volunteers I spoke to were located in the same Russian city where I stayed, but online interviews were easier to schedule and caused less disruption to their typically very busy schedules. Being present in Russia, though, helped me to process our conversations. Sharing the same environment, seeing the same or similar billboards on the streets, driving for several hours to and from the nearest PVR, stopping by a newly opened humanitarian aid warehouse – these experiences gave greater resonance to the stories the volunteers shared with me.

The interviews were loosely structured around questions of how my interlocutors became involved in volunteering; what they did; how their initiative emerged and how it was working at the moment; examples of the situations they managed to address and how; the situations they found most difficult to address; and how volunteering fit into their daily life. I call the interviews ‘loosely structured’, rather than ‘semi-structured’, because I intentionally left a lot of space for the volunteers to direct the flow of conversation, and bring up topics that they considered important. At the beginning of the interviews, I would usually ask the participant how they became a volunteer, and the rest of the conversation would flow naturally from there. During some interviews I would only ask a few follow-up questions, because the points I had in mind, and much else besides, had been covered without me asking directly. Overall I conducted 52 interviews, with 10 of these being second interviews conducted several months after I first interviewed the participant. The interviews lasted on average about an hour, and were mostly recorded. ‘Mostly recorded’ means that sometimes volunteers would ask me to stop recording, and explain something or illustrate the point they were making by relaying information intended for my consumption only. Sometimes they would purposefully wait until the end of an interview, when I turned off my recorder to add a reflection or an observation. And in other cases, at the end of an interview, the participant would think back through our conversation and say something like, ‘You know, I mentioned X during our conversation, and now I’m thinking it’s better to omit that in your texts’. In such cases I would edit the relevant part out of the interview transcript. These unrecorded and erased portions of interviews were important for my understanding of the challenges and dilemmas that volunteers face, and have lent more precision to this book, although I never described the insights thus received in my fieldnotes, nor do I directly refer to such ‘unrecorded’ information in the book.

I began my interviews with Vasilisa, and tried to follow a systematic sampling strategy, focusing first on individual volunteers and then, sequentially, on different kinds of group initiatives. This strategy proved unworkable, however, because volunteers often did not remain firmly attached to a single and clearly delineated volunteering role. For instance, one person started volunteering as an On the Move coordinator, proceeded

to specialize in complicated medical evacuations, and over time started to work as a highly specialized individual volunteer, who takes on their own cases but also coordinates assistance for some requests taken by On the Move. Often people would work with several group initiatives at the same time, or would start out individually but proceed to found small group initiatives like humanitarian aid warehouses. So I revised my plan and started following volunteer networks, asking my initial informants whom I should talk to next to better understand the ecosystem of volunteer initiatives. My informants would ask around, and those among their contacts who wanted to talk to me would contact me directly via Telegram, telling me who gave them my Telegram handle. Following volunteer networks in this way led me, among others, to the Another City chat, which came to feature centrally in this book. This strategy was better suited to the emergent and flexible dynamics of the ecosystem, and prevented me from potentially locking onto a classification of initiatives that was useful as an exploratory heuristic, but not as a rigid taxonomy. I ended up speaking to individual volunteers with different degrees of connection to group initiatives; volunteers who were centrally involved in organizing the work of On the Move and FP, and others who took on specific roles, such as bot operator within these initiatives; volunteers involved in local initiatives that mostly focused on specific PVRs and operating warehouses, including the core group of Another City chat; and volunteers involved in country-wide initiatives that did not have an explicit specialization, but tried to deal with whatever situations arose.

Meanwhile, I continued following the public Telegram chats and social media accounts of the initiatives I had selected for in-depth exploration. Since, by now, my presence was announced to these groups, I started occasionally copying illustrative messages (without Telegram handles) in my notes, instead of only summarizing in my own words. In addition, I was added to three closed administrative chats of one of the initiatives, to gain insight into how the work of the collective is negotiated and coordinated. I did not copy messages from the closed chats, but I took notes about the overall organizational arrangements and the nature of the situations addressed.

I shared a report describing the preliminary results of my study in Russian with research participants who had spoken to me for their comments and corrections. Some participants offered repeat interviews, to add details that were not in the preliminary report. I understand that the report was circulated beyond my initial group of participants, because several volunteers I had not spoken to before contacted me, citing who they got my contact details from, and offered to share their stories.

To conclude, my analysis that forms the major part of this book draws on the data outlined earlier: closely following the open Telegram chats and channels, Facebook profiles, and websites of 17 novel volunteer initiatives, and comparatively probing into other initiatives using their social media;

exploring in depth four selected initiatives and their interactions with the volunteer ecology, through 52 ‘loosely structured’ interviews, and through following their open Telegram chats and three closed administrative chats of one of the initiatives; and discussions of my preliminary findings with participants.

Patriotic initiatives

About halfway through the interviews described in the previous section, I felt that it was time to start exploring the patriotic initiatives. When deciding on how to proceed with data generation for these initiatives, I kept two considerations in mind. First, I was not aiming to conduct a strictly comparative investigation, which would pay symmetrical attention to non-patriotic and patriotic volunteer initiatives as if they constituted two separate ecologies; instead, I analytically approached all initiatives that aimed to provide assistance to people from Ukraine while in Russia as forming one deeply divided ecology. Although the patriotic and non-patriotic initiatives did not cooperate, they knew of and accounted for one another’s existence, and apparently had rather strong feelings towards each other. Given this combination of non-cooperation with an inescapable and highly distressing connection, I felt it made sense to look at patriotic initiatives in their tangled relation to the rest of the ecology, the most active and steady parts of which tended to be non-patriotic. Second, therefore, I wanted to look not at the patriotic initiatives’ operations as such, but more at the fault lines that set them apart from non-patriotic ones and were reflected in their modes of operation. I saw here an opportunity to better understand wider societal polarizing processes, and the crystallization of what appeared to be mutually exclusive versions of the Russian national identity and national futures.

Given these two considerations, I decided to start by observing the Telegram chats of patriotic initiatives, and to determine in the process how much and what kinds of data would be sufficient for me to delineate what makes the patriotic initiatives so different despite them doing largely the same things as non-patriotic initiatives, and to make sense of the irreconcilable divide between the two. In the absence of country-wide grassroots patriotic initiatives similar in scale and stability to *On the Move* or *FP*, and with individual patriotic volunteers mostly touring occupied territories, I settled on following regional patriotic initiatives. Originally I thought to cast my search for these initiatives across Russia, but upon scanning the landscape I found the most active patriotic initiatives were located close to the border with Ukraine. After following multiple initiatives for several weeks and reading their group chats back to the inception, I identified two initiatives from the same region – which I have called *The Circle* and the *Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova* (the *Assistance Centre*) – that presented an excellent

opportunity for me to get at what tore patriotic and non-patriotic initiatives apart. These two groups had quite different modes of operation, and were in direct conflict with each other; however, they still shared a common vision of ‘Russianness’ setting them apart from non-patriotic initiatives.

I started by carefully reading the open chats of The Circle and the Assistance Centre, making notes about the types of requests that were posted, the typical ways of addressing requests, the topics of discussions and arguments offered, and the language used by members (for example to refer to the war, the occupied territories, the Russian army, and so on). The chats of these two initiatives were much less restrained than the open chats of non-patriotic initiatives, which did not allow discussions on explicitly political topics. When researching the non-patriotic initiatives, I needed to talk to the volunteers directly to hear about their motives, aims, and feelings, which were only hinted at in the chats. The chats of the patriotic initiatives, on the other hand, were spaces of ongoing collective meaning-making, with members explicitly expressing their concerns and aspirations, articulating what they thought was good and bad and why, and mapping the world around them accordingly, with Ukrainian territories controlled by the Russian army being ‘freed’, and Ukrainian refugees being better off in Russia, where ‘they belong’, than in the adversarial EU. Needless to say, while occasional disagreements did erupt, any voices that significantly deviated from the pro-war baseline were attacked (the arguments used in such attacks were informative as well) and usually banned from the chat. Owing to these continuous discussions, the Telegram chats of the two patriotic initiatives I was following were rather lengthy, with daily message counts typically significantly exceeding those of the non-patriotic initiatives. Thus, because of the possibility of observing such discussions in the open Telegram chats of The Circle and the Assistance Centre, I was able to gather more information about the motivations, aims, and concerns of these volunteers than was typically apparent from the open Telegram chats of the non-patriotic initiatives.

Furthermore, and again in contrast to the non-patriotic initiatives, the patriotic volunteer initiatives were not at all averse to being featured in the media, such as news outlets, blogs with large audiences, and regional TV programmes. Their media appearances, which included interviews and video reports from their offices, warehouses, and fieldwork locations, provided rich details about their work and how it was being shaped by their aspirations. I collected all of the media appearances of The Circle and the Assistance Centre, which I found by running searches of the names of the initiatives and/or their leaders and/or versions of the word ‘volunteer’ in Yandex.ru.

I ended up limiting my data generation for patriotic initiatives to these sources: closely following the open Telegram chats of the two selected initiatives, and systematically tracing their media appearances. I must admit

that I did not expect my interactions with the patriotic volunteers to have gone smoothly if I had opted to try to also add interviews. A Russian living in the EU and conducting research about Russia would have had every chance of being met with suspicion and, perhaps, hostility. Nonetheless, I would have tried to establish contact if the otherwise generated data would have been insufficient for reaching my aim: delineating the fault lines that set patriotic volunteers apart from non-patriotic ones, making their goals and aspirations entirely incompatible, despite their dedication to doing seemingly the same thing – assisting Ukrainian war refugees. I can imagine that I missed some particularities of how the work of these two initiatives is organized, and how exactly the volunteers who make up these collectives found each other. But I was able to trace how their modes of operation reflect their larger commitments to a specific version of Russianness and future, and how their commitments clash with those of non-patriotic volunteers, leaving virtually nothing in common between them.

Data analysis

Preliminary data analysis proceeded alongside data generation. While making notes to document my social media observations, I highlighted emergent themes, similarities, and differences between the different initiatives, as well as key challenges and points of disagreement – everything that would help me reconstruct how such large-scale grassroots collective action became possible. I would then make a more abstract summary of patterns I saw coming through in analytical memos that I wrote weekly. The content of these memos fed back into my data generation, pointing to issues that required further exploration, initiatives to focus on, and questions to ask during the interviews. At the end of the active data generation stage, the analytical memos supported my thinking process by reminding me of insights, emotions, and clues as I experienced them during the fieldwork.

I used social media data, primarily data from Telegram chats, to create draft timelines of the emergence and development of the initiatives I followed, and to draw maps delineating how different initiatives relate to each other. I drew multiple versions of these maps to reflect on different kinds of relations, including those related to territorial coverage, specialization, and size. I also noted salient themes in the social media data, such as a commitment to EBM in the FP chat, and drew on these themes to develop initial characterizations of the initiatives' modes of operation. Interview data with non-patriotic volunteers allowed me to correct and complete my timelines, maps, and descriptions of modes of operation, through crosslinking what volunteers say and what they do (the chats, especially the closed administrative chats, provided a good vantage point on what was being done), providing insight into behind-the-scene processes, and explaining how the operational

specificities of different initiatives came about. Furthermore, I analysed my interview data thematically, distinguishing salient themes in light of the theoretical literature, synthesized in this book, on public participation and the societal effects of digital media. I also analysed thematically the media appearances of patriotic volunteers, and juxtaposed the results of my thematic analyses for both patriotic and non-patriotic initiatives to trace the fault lines separating them. Throughout this process, I was also taking note of my own emotions, such as astonishment and occasional horror. Recognizing the epistemic value of emotions – another ethnographically inspired characteristic of this research – I followed this compass and found that it often alerted me to important points of incompatibility between the worlds that the patriotic and non-patriotic initiatives were calling into existence.

Finally, my thinking throughout the analytic process was checked and aided by regular discussions with my research team members. At a more advanced stage, my preliminary results and the process of arriving at them were presented to a broader circle of colleagues during academic gatherings in my department and at other venues.

References

- Anderson, B.R. (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edn), Verso.
- Asmolov, G. (2024) 'Propaganda in the network environment: how propaganda has changed in the era of social media and during times of war', *RE: Russia*, 4 May, Available at: <https://re-russia.net/en/expertise/714/> (Accessed: 5 August 2025).
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage Publications (Theory, Culture & Society).
- Beck, U. (1997) 'Subpolitics: ecology and the disintegration of institutional power', *Organization & Environment*, 10(1), pp 52–65.
- Bennett, W.L. and Segerberg, A. (2012) 'The logic of connective action: digital media and the personalization of contentious politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), pp 739–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>.
- Birkbak, A. (2016) 'Caring for publics: how media contribute to issue politics', Aalborg Universitetsforlag.
- Blais, A., Gidengil, E. and Nevitte, N. (2004) 'Where does turnout decline come from?', *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(2), pp 221–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2004.00152.x>.
- Boden, R., Epstein, D. and Latimer, J. (2009) 'Accounting for ethos or programmes for conduct? The brave new world of research ethics committees', *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), pp 727–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01869.x>.
- Bosk, C.L. and De Vries, R.G. (2004) 'Bureaucracies of mass deception: institutional review boards and the ethics of ethnographic research', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 595(1), pp 249–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716204266913>.
- boyd, d. (2011) 'Social network sites as networked publics: affordances, dynamics, and implications', in Z. Papacharissi (ed) *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, Routledge, pp 39–58.

- Braun, K. and Könninger, S. (2018) 'From experiments to ecosystems? Reviewing public participation, scientific governance and the systemic turn', *Public Understanding of Science*, 27(6), pp 674–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662517717375>.
- Brown, M.B. (2015) 'Politicizing science: conceptions of politics in science and technology studies', *Social Studies of Science*, 45(1), pp 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312714556694>.
- Brubaker, R. (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (1st edn), Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511558764>.
- Bruns, A. and Burgess, J. (2015) 'Twitter hashtags from ad hoc to calculated publics', in N. Rambukkana (ed) *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks [Digital Formations, Volume 103]*, Peter Lang Publishing, pp 13–27.
- Bruns, A., Moon, B., Paul, A. and Münch, F. (2016) 'Towards a typology of hashtag publics: a large-scale comparative study of user engagement across trending topics', *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), pp 20–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155328>.
- Bucchi, M. and Neresini, F. (2008) 'Science and public participation', in *New Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, MIT Press, pp 449–73.
- Burkhardt, F. and Wijermars, M. (2022) 'Digital authoritarianism and Russia's war against Ukraine: how sanctions-induced infrastructural disruptions are reshaping Russia's repressive capacities', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 42(2), pp 21–43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2022.0009>.
- Calenda, D. and Meijer, A. (2009) 'Young people, the internet and political participation: findings of a web survey in Italy, Spain and the Netherlands', *Information, Communication & Society*, 12(6), pp 879–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180802158508>.
- Callon, M. and Law, J. (1997) 'Agency and the hybrid collectif', in B.H. Smith and A. Plotnitsky (eds) *Mathematics, Science, and Postclassical Theory*, Duke University Press, pp 95–117, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822382720-006>.
- Chadwick, A. (2017) *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd edn), Oxford University Press (Oxford studies in digital politics).
- Chilvers, J. and Kearnes, M. (eds) (2016) *Remaking Participation: Science, Environment and Emergent Publics*, Routledge.
- Chilvers, J., Bellamy, R., Pallett, H. and Hargreaves, T. (2021) 'A systemic approach to mapping participation with low-carbon energy transitions', *Nature Energy*, 6(3), pp 250–9, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-020-00762-w>.
- Christin, A. (2020) *Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms*, Princeton University Press.

- Copeland, L. (2014) 'Value change and political action: postmaterialism, political consumerism, and political participation', *American Politics Research*, 42(2), pp 257–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X13494235>.
- Costa, E. (2018) 'Affordances-in-practice: an ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse', *New Media & Society*, 20(10), pp 3641–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818756290>.
- Curato, N. (2021) *Deliberative Mini-publics: Core Design Features*, Bristol University Press (Bristol shorts research).
- Dalton, R.J. (2008) 'Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation', *Political Studies*, 56(1), pp 76–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x>.
- Davis, J.L. and Chouinard, J.B. (2016) 'Theorizing affordances: from request to refuse', *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 36(4), pp 241–8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467617714944>.
- de Laet, M. and Mol, A. (2000) 'The Zimbabwe bush pump: mechanics of a fluid technology', *Social Studies of Science*, 30(2), pp 225–63.
- De Moor, J. (2017) 'Lifestyle politics and the concept of political participation', *Acta Politica*, 52(2), pp 179–97, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2015.27>.
- de Vries, G. (2007) 'What is political in sub-politics?: How Aristotle might help STS', *Social Studies of Science*, 37(5), pp 781–809, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312706070749>.
- Dekeyser, T. and Garrett, B. (2021) 'Illegal ethnographies', in S. Henn, J. Miggelbrink, and K. Hörschelmann, *Research Ethics in Human Geography* (1st edn), Routledge, pp 153–67, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507366-9>.
- Dingwall, R. (2008) 'The ethical case against ethical regulation in humanities and social science research', *Twenty-First Century Society*, 3(1), pp 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450140701749189>.
- Earl, J. and Kimport, K. (2011) *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, MIT Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhcb9>.
- Ekman, J. and Amnå, E. (2012) 'Political participation and civic engagement: towards a new typology', *Human Affairs*, 22(3), pp 283–300, <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>.
- Ermoshina, K. and Musiani, F. (2021) 'The Telegram ban: how censorship “made in Russia” faces a global Internet', *First Monday*, 26(5), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i5.11704>.
- Evans, S.K., Pearce, K.E., Vitak, J. and Treem, J.W. (2017) 'Explicating affordances: a conceptual framework for understanding affordances in communication research', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22(1), pp 35–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12180>.

- Felt, U. (2015) 'Keeping technologies out: sociotechnical imaginaries and the formation of Austria's technopolitical identity', in S. Jasanoff and S.-H. Kim (eds) *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, University of Chicago Press, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226276663.001.0001>.
- Foucault, M. (1991) 'On governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, pp 87–104.
- Fox, S. (2014) 'Is it time to update the definition of political participation?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67(2), pp 495–505, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss094>.
- Garrett, B. (2014) 'Place-hacker Bradley Garrett: research at the edge of the law', *Times Higher Education*, Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/place-hacker-bradley-garrett-research-at-the-edge-of-the-law/2013717.article> (Accessed: 8 August 2025).
- Gibson, J. (1966) *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Houghton Mifflin.
- Gibson, R. and Cantijoch, M. (2013) 'Conceptualizing and measuring participation in the age of the internet: is online political engagement really different to offline?', *The Journal of Politics*, 75(3), pp 701–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613000431>.
- Gibson, R.K., Lusoli, W. and Ward, S. (2005) 'Online participation in the UK: testing a "contextualised" model of internet effects', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7(4), pp 561–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2005.00209.x>.
- Gillespie, T. (2014) 'The relevance of algorithms', in T. Gillespie, P.J. Boczkowski, and K.A. Foot (eds) *Media Technologies*, MIT Press, pp 167–94, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9042.003.0013>.
- Gimmler, A. (2001) 'Deliberative democracy, the public sphere and the internet', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 27(4), pp 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145370102700402>.
- Goodin, R.E. and Dryzek, J.S. (2006) 'Deliberative impacts: the macro-political uptake of mini-publics', *Politics & Society*, 34(2), pp 219–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329206288152>.
- Gradska, Y., Kondakov, A. and Shevtsova, M. (2020) 'Post-socialist revolutions of intimacy: an introduction', *Sexuality & Culture*, 24(2), pp 359–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09706-8>.
- Habermas, J. (2022) 'Reflections and hypotheses on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(4), pp 145–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221112341>.
- Habermas, J., Lennox, S. and Lennox, F. (1974) 'The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964)', *New German Critique*, (3), p 49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487737>.

- Halupka, M. (2014) 'Clicktivism: a systematic heuristic', *Policy & Internet*, 6(2), pp 115–32, <https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI355>.
- Harrison, C.E. and Johnson, A. (2009) 'Introduction: science and national identity', *Osiris*, 24(1), pp 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1086/605966>.
- Hecht, G. (1998) *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*, MIT Press (Inside technology).
- Herzfeld, M. (2023) 'Ethnographic responsibility: can the bureaucratization of research ethics be ethical?', *Anthropology Today*, 39(3), pp 3–6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12811>.
- Holzer, B. and Sørensen, M.P. (2003) 'Rethinking subpolitics: beyond the “iron cage” of modern politics?', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(2), pp 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276403020002005>.
- Iphofen, R. (2021) *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*, European Commission, DG Research and Innovation, Available at: <https://www.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/research-ethics-in-ethnographyanthropology-ron-iphofen-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 8 August 2025).
- Jasanoff, S. (2007) *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States*, Princeton University Press.
- Jeppesen, S., Hoechsmann, M., ulthiin, i.h., VanDyke, D. and McKee, M. (2022) *The Capitol Riots: Digital Media, Disinformation, and Democracy Under Attack* (1st edn), Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003246862>.
- Karahanna, E., Xu, S.X., Xu, Y. and Zhang, A. (2018) 'The needs–affordances–features perspective for the use of social media', *MIS Quarterly*, 42(3), pp 737–A23.
- Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D.G. and Vedel, T. (2016) 'Civic political engagement and social change in the new digital age', *New Media & Society*, 18(9), pp 1807–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815616218>.
- Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by C. Porter. Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2004) *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard University Press.
- Levine, C., Faden, R., Grady, C., Hammerschmidt, D., Eckenwiler, L. and Sugarman, J. (2004) 'The limitations of “vulnerability” as a protection for human research participants', *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 4(3), pp 44–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265160490497083>.
- Lezaun, J. and Soneryd, L. (2007) 'Consulting citizens: technologies of elicitation and the mobility of publics', *Public Understanding of Science*, 16(3), pp 279–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662507079371>.
- Lezaun, J., Marres, N. and Tironi, M. (2016) 'Experiments in participation', *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (4th edn), pp 195–221.
- Librett, M. and Perrone, D. (2010) 'Apples and oranges: ethnography and the IRB', *Qualitative Research*, 10(6), pp 729–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110380548>.

- Lokot, T. (2023) 'Russia's networked authoritarianism in Ukraine's occupied territories during the full-scale invasion: control and resilience', *LSE Public Policy Review*, 3(1), p 7, <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.85>.
- Lorenz-Spreen, P., Oswald, L., Lewandowsky, S. and Hertwig, R. (2022) 'A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(1), pp 74–101, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>.
- Lowman, J. and Palys, T. (2014) 'The betrayal of research confidentiality in British sociology', *Research Ethics*, 10(2), pp 97–118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016113481145>.
- Luna, F. (2009) 'Elucidating the concept of vulnerability: layers not labels', *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, 2(1), pp 121–39, <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.2.1.121>.
- Lutz, C., Hoffmann, C.P. and Meckel, M. (2014) 'Beyond just politics: a systematic literature review of online participation', *First Monday*, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.5260>.
- Mahon, A. and Walker, S. (2024) 'Russia's digital repression landscape: unraveling the Kremlin's digital repression tactics', *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 4(3), pp 29–50, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCQU3579>.
- Marres, N. (2005) 'Issues spark a public into being. A key but often forgotten point of the Lippman-Dewey debate', in B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, [exhibition at ZKM, Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe 20.03.–03.10.2005], MIT Press, pp 208–17.
- Marres, N. (2015) *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment, and Everyday Publics*. Paperback edition. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marres, N. (2023) 'How to turn politics around: things, the Earth, ecology', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 48(5), pp 973–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01622439231190884>.
- Møller Hartley, J., Bengtsson, M., Hansen, A.S. and Sivertsen, M.F. (2023) 'Researching publics in datafied societies: insights from four approaches to the concept of "publics" and a (hybrid) research agenda', *New Media & Society*, 25(7), pp 1668–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211021045>.
- Morgus, R. (2019) *The Spread of Russia's Digital Authoritarianism*, Air University Press, Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19585.17>.
- Morozov, E. (2009) 'The brave new world of slacktivism', *Foreign Policy*, Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/>.
- Niemeyer, S. (2011) 'The emancipatory effect of deliberation: empirical lessons from mini-publics', *Politics & Society*, 39(1), pp 103–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329210395000>.
- Norman, D. (1988) *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, Basic Books.

- Opsal, T., Wolgemuth, J., Cross, J., Kaanta, T., Dickmann, E., Colomer, S. et al (2016) “‘There are no known benefits ...’: considering the risk/benefit ratio of qualitative research’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(8), pp 1137–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315580109>.
- Oser, J., Hooghe, M. and Marien, S. (2013) ‘Is online participation distinct from offline participation? A latent class analysis of participation types and their stratification’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 66(1), pp 91–101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912912436695>.
- OVD-Info (2025) *Persecution of the anti-war movement report: three years into Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, February 2025*, Available at: https://ovd.info/en/antiwar_3_years?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_term=%28not+set%29#1.
- Persily, N. and Tucker, J.A. (eds) (2020) *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (1st edn), Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960>.
- Powell, A. (2015) ‘Seeking rape justice: formal and informal responses to sexual violence through technosocial counter-publics’, *Theoretical Criminology*, 19(4), pp 571–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480615576271>.
- Putnam, R.D. (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Touchstone edn), Simon & Schuster (A Touchstone book).
- Rabeharisoa, V., Callon, M., Filipe, A.M., Nunes, J.A., Paterson, F. and Vergnaud, F. (2014) ‘From “politics of numbers” to “politics of singularisation”: patients’ activism and engagement in research on rare diseases in France and Portugal’, *BioSocieties*, 9(2), pp 194–217, <https://doi.org/10.1057/biosoc.2014.4>.
- Rambukkana, N. (2015) *Hashtag Publics*, Peter Lang Verlag, <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1672-8>.
- Ronzhyn, A., Cardenal, A.S. and Batlle Rubio, A. (2023) ‘Defining affordances in social media research: a literature review’, *New Media & Society*, 25(11), pp 3165–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221135187>.
- Rose, N. and Miller, P. (2010) ‘Political power beyond the State: problematics of government’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(s1), pp 271–303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2009.01247.x>.
- Ruess, C., Hoffmann, C.P., Boulianne, S. and Heger, K. (2023) ‘Online political participation: the evolution of a concept’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(8), pp 1495–512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.2013919>.
- Scarce, R. (1995) ‘Scholarly ethics and courtroom antics: where researchers stand in the eyes of the law’, *The American Sociologist*, 26(1), pp 87–112, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02692012>.
- Schroeder, R. (2018) *Social Theory after the Internet*, UCL Press, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787351226>.

- Shore, C. (2024) 'The bureaucratization of ethical integrity: research ethics committees and imaginaries of risk', *Anthropology Today*, 40(2), pp 8–10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12872>.
- Smith, G. (2009) *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*, Cambridge University Press.
- Steinert, S. and Dennis, M.J. (2022) 'Emotions and digital well-being: on social media's emotional affordances', *Philosophy & Technology*, 35(2), p 36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00530-6>.
- Stolle, D., Hooghe, M. and Micheletti, M. (2005) 'Politics in the supermarket: political consumerism as a form of political participation', *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique*, 26(3), pp 245–69.
- Sunstein, C.R. (2018) *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton University Press, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8xnhtd>.
- Surak, K. (2012) 'Nation-work: a praxeology of making and maintaining nations', *European Journal of Sociology*, 53(2), pp 171–204, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975612000094>.
- TASS (2024) 'Mediascope: WhatsApp остается самым популярным мессенджером в РФ', Available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/22390143> (Accessed: 5 August 2025).
- Terzyan, A. (2023) *Towards 'Digital Sovereignty': Explaining Digital Repression in Russia*, 15(1), Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, pp 1–14, Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/286688>.
- Theiss-Morse, E. and Hibbing, J.R. (2005) 'Citizenship and civic engagement', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8(1), pp 227–49, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104829>.
- Theocharis, Y. (2015) 'The conceptualization of digitally networked participation', *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), p 205630511561014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115610140>.
- Theocharis, Y. and Van Deth, J.W. (2018) 'The continuous expansion of citizen participation: a new taxonomy', *European Political Science Review*, 10(1), pp 139–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230>.
- Theocharis, Y., De Moor, J. and Van Deth, J.W. (2021) 'Digitally networked participation and lifestyle politics as new modes of political participation', *Policy & Internet*, 13(1), pp 30–53, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.231>.
- Trenz, H.-J. (2009) 'Digital media and the return of the representative public sphere', *Javnost – The Public*, 16(1), pp 33–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2009.11008996>.
- Tucker, J., Guess, A., Barbera, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S. et al (2018) 'Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: a review of the scientific literature', *SSRN Electronic Journal* [Preprint], <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139>.

- Van Deth, J.W. (2014) 'A conceptual map of political participation', *Acta Politica*, 49(3), pp 349–67, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.6>.
- Van Dijck, J. and Poell, T. (2015) 'Social media and the transformation of public space', *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), p 205630511562248, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622482>.
- Verba, S. and Nie, N.H. (1972) *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, Harper & Row.
- Verba, S., Scholzman, K.L. and Brady, H.E. (1995) *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Harvard University Press, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1pnc1k7>.
- Vicari, S. (2022) *Digital Media and Participatory Cultures of Health and Illness*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (Routledge studies in new media and cyberculture).
- Voß, J.-P. and Amelung, N. (2016) 'Innovating public participation methods: technoscience and reflexive engagement', *Social Studies of Science*, 46(5), pp 749–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312716641350>.
- Weber, M. (1994) *Weber: Political Writings* (1st edn), edited by P. Lassman. Translated by R. Speirs. Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511841095>.
- Whiteley, P. (2012) *Political Participation in Britain: The Decline and Revival of Civic Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan (Contemporary political studies series).
- Wijermars, M. and Lokot, T. (2022) 'Is Telegram a “harbinger of freedom”? The performance, practices, and perception of platforms as political actors in authoritarian states', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(1–2), pp 125–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2030645>.
- Wynne, B. (2007) 'Public participation in science and technology: performing and obscuring a political–conceptual category mistake', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal*, 1(1), pp 99–110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12280-007-9004-7>.

Index

References to the table appear in **bold** type.

A

academic freedom 145
action networks 6, 59, 88
adaptability and resilience of volunteer initiatives' ecology 85–7
affordances 9–11, 136
Airtable database 37, 38, 71, 88
algorithms, political character of 97
all-Russian nation 115–16
alternative society 15–16
Amazon 96, 97
Amina 61–2, 63, 68
Anna 43, 46, 48
Another City chat 69–72, 155, 157
 acquisition of resources by 83–4
 balancing going public and remaining hidden 83–4
 humanitarian aid distribution and warehouses 82, 87
 media coverage of 83–4
 orderliness of 79–80
 organization of work 71, 157
 requests, handling of 83
 rules 71
 systematicity of 79
 volunteer roles 72
antagonisms and antagonization 21, 24
API *see* Application Programming Interface *under* Telegram
Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova 103, 104, 158–9
 accessing of funds for 106
 as philanthropic effort 104–5
 chat 106, 113, 159 *see also* chats *under* Telegram
 extending the state through assistance provision 107–11, 121
 firm orientation towards publicity 104–7, 121, 159
 requests, processing of 104
 see also Fedorova, Daria

Austria, avoidance of nuclear and agrobiotechnologies by 126
Austrianness 126
awards ceremonies 104, 105–6 *see also* We Are Together award, receipt of *under* Fedorova, Daria

B

biomedical research 143
boycott of products 54
bureaucratic requirements 149

C

care, doing 39–48, 132
censorship 149
centres for temporary accommodation (PVR), state 25–6, 27, 33, 102, 151, 154, 155, 156, 157
 assistance with securing placement in 69, 70–3, 108, 109
 procuring medicine for patients in 47
chats 159 *see also* Another City chat; chat *under* Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova; chat *under* The Circle; chat *under* For Patients; chat *under* On the Move initiative; chats *under* Telegram; Unite chat
The Circle 100, 158–9
 acquisition of resources 100, 101, 108
 addressing of the existence of the enemy 120
 aid provided by 100–1, 108, 109
 assistance
 provision to the Russian military 120
 within Russian Federation alone 116
 chat 101–2, 104, 105, 106, 108, 110, 111, 112–13, 115–19, 120–1, 159 *see also* chats *under* Telegram
 distribution of aid and packages 100, 101, 120–1
 and 'the enemy' 118–21

Fedorova's expulsion from 112–13, 115
 firm orientation towards publicity 104–7, 159
 mediating between the state apparatus and people from Ukraine in Russia 110–11 and 'one people' 115–18, 120
 posts 120
 publicization of work 121
 recruitment of volunteers 100
 requests for aid 100, 101–2
 return from Lugansk region of Russia 116
 volunteer activities 118
see also Ivan
 clicktivism 58
 CMI certificate *see* compulsory medical insurance certificate
 colleagues and research team members 161
 collective action 2, 3, 6, 81, 103, 140, 160
 collective identities and digital connectivity 123
 collective resolution 21
 collective ties 24
 commonality of the shared world 22
 compulsory medical insurance (CMI) certificate 30, 34, 35, 36, 37, 44, 49, 110
 confidentiality 142–3, 144, 145–6
 connective action and connectivity 63, 123
 consent, forgoing of written informed 141

D

decision making 19–20, 93, 142
 democracy
 and digital media 135
 divisiveness of 133
 signs of
 deterioration of 53
 vibrancy of 53–4
 digital authoritarianism 11
 digital connectivity, increased 60
 digital media 96
 ambivalence of 134–8
 as a means of organizing alternatives 24, 63
 and democracy 135
 effects of dependent on political context 135
 enablement of construction of different versions of national identity 131
 importance of for nations and national identities 127
 instrumentality of 136
 platform-centric approach to claims for 9–10, 11, 136
 political context and effects of 135
 potential
 to drive societal divisions 135
 to facilitate societal cohesion 135–6
 practice-centric approach to claims for 9, 136

use of by volunteer networks in Russia 8, 11, 63
 digital studies scholarship 97
 digital technologies
 adoption of role of established political organizations 58
 difference of from non-digital forms of participation 57
 increased connectivity afforded by 58
 and participation 57–60
 relational affordances of 10–11, 136
 role of 103
 situated interactions between users and 136
 specificity of 99
 volunteer reliance on 2 *see also* Telegram
 digitalization and publics 6–7
 digitally mediated contingencies 24–8
 disclosure policy 143, 144–5
 diversity of participation in politics 53–6
 Doctors Without Borders 105
 documentation
 medical 40–1, 74 *see also* compulsory medical insurance certificate
 for refugees, obtaining 77, 101, 104, 109, 110
 for transportation of horse 85–7
 written informed consent 141
 Donetsk People's Republic 115
 provision of school supplies and school uniform to children in 110–11
 UWR delivery of humanitarian aid and books to 115

E

EBM *see* evidence-based medicine
 echo chambers, emergence of 59
 Ekaterina 26, 27, 28, 34, 35, 36, 49, 80
 Elena 23–4
 Elizaveta 23, 42–3
 emergencies and non-emergencies 41–5
 emotions, epistemic value of 161
 energy transitions 54–5
 engagement as a possibility for the future 8
 engine 37–8 *see also* Airtable database; bots *under* Telegram
 ERC *see* European Research Council
 ethics 141–50
 EU *see* European Union
 European Research Council (ERC) 139
 European Union (EU) 1, 102, 119, 130, 152, 155, 159, 160
 Evgenii 42
 evidence-based medicine (EBM), adherence to 41, 45–8, 160

F

Facebook 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 23, 25, 26, 59, 84, 96, 97, 150, 153–4, 157
 Fedorova, Daria

The Art of Volunteering 108, 109, 111
 conflict with Ivan 104, 105–7, 112–13
 election as head of The Circle 108–9
 expulsion from The Circle 112–13, 115
 extending of state's reach to people from
 Ukraine inside Russia 110–11, 113–14
 location in the Border Region 107–8, 111
 meeting with Deputy Chief of Staff of the
 Presidential Executive Office 114
 safety of 106
 vlog 108
 We Are Together award, receipt of 104–6,
 114
see also Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova
 5G masts, installation of 5, 21, 22
 For Patients (FP) 24, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 64,
 150, 153, 155, 158
 as a political community 48
 as part of larger ecology of volunteer
 initiatives 49–50, 152
 as provider of systemic assistance 49
 assistance with medical documents 40–1
 care collective, assembling of 34–9
 chat 38, 150–1, 160
 coordinators 49
 emergence of 132
 flagging of emergency situations 32
 formats 28–34
 limitations of 49
 moderating of 38 *see also* chats
under Telegram
 moderation rules 31–2, 33
 modification of requests to indicate those
 addressed 131
 orderliness of 80
 organizers and organization of healthcare
 provision 2, 27, 33, 35, 82, 137, 157
 referrals made in 38, 78, 151
 requests for healthcare advice and
 assistance 24–5, 28, 31, 32–3, 35, 37–8, 79
 roles adopted in 157
 use
 of back office (operators) 35–6, 38
 of moderators/moderation team 31–2, 33
 of telephone 35, 38
 FP *see* For Patients
 French nation, nuclear reactor design and
 formation of the 125–6, 127

G

genetically modified (GM) food 94
 GM food *see* genetically modified food
 Google forms and tables 32, 33, 100, 118
 Groningen University Hospital 20
 group chat 26, 27, 28, 31, 33, 35, 39, 65, 88,
 100, 109, 112, 116, 158
 closed 27, 28, 74
 open 27, 28, 105

H

hashtags and hashtag publics 32, 33, 97
 health conditions, reporting of 42
 healthcare, politics of 23–50, 150
 Helping To Leave 71
 humanitarian aid warehouses 87

I

Inna 40–1, 42, 47, 48, 49
 Instagram, blocking of 12
 instantaneity 63
 interdependencies 21
 interface design decisions, effective 9
 intermezzi 5, 6–7, 17–22, 53–60, 93–9,
 123–7
 Internet 22, 59, 73
 interview data
 maintaining confidentiality of 146
 with non-patriotic volunteers 160–1
 interviews, conducting of 155–6, 158
 Ivan 100, 101–2, 108, 111
 as head of The Circle 115–19, 121
 conflict with Fedorova 104, 105–7, 112–13
 provision of humanitarian aid 118
 urging Ukrainians to remain in
 Russia 118–19
see also The Circle

L

law, obedience to and awareness of 143–4
 lifestyle politics 54
 Lugansk People's Republic 115
 provision of school supplies and school
 uniform to children in 110–11
 UWR delivery of humanitarian aid and
 books to 115

M

Maria 83–4, 85–6, 88, 153
 medical care initiatives 73–5, 79 *see also* For
 Patients; Medical Support; Vasilisa
 medical executives, closed chat of 27, 33–4
 Medical Support (MS) 79, 154
 orderliness of 81
 systematicity of 79
 methodology 150–61
 data analysis 160–1
 data generation
 non-patriotic initiatives 151–8, 159
 patriotic initiatives 155, 158–60
 strategy 155
 pre-research stage 150–1
 MS *see* Medical Support

N

Nadezhda 25–6, 27, 28, 31, 33
 Natalia 67, 68
 nation-state, strong comeback of the 130

national identities 123–7
 differentiation of top-down/bottom-up practices/components 125–6
 intense future orientation of 126–7
 and reasons for volunteering 128–9
 rehearsal of and concomitant change 126
 nations
 as categories produced in practice 123–4
 and national identities 7, 123–7
 The Netherlands 19–20
 networks of connections 58
 Nina 101–2
 novel and newspaper as means of imagining nations 124–5, 131

O

Occupy movement, role of Twitter hashtags in 98
 Odnoklassniki 12
 Ogden, Russel 145
 On Healthcare in Russia 34–5, 36, 38, 39, 44
 ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ (Putin) 115
 On the Move initiative 25, 26, 32, 64–9, 74, 150, 153, 155, 158
 acquisition of resources 83
 balance between orderliness and spontaneity 80–1
 branching out of 87
 chat 70, 77–8, 87
 chat A 65, 68
 chat B 65, 66, 68, 72, 73, 81
 chat Standing By 65, 68, 70
 collaborations formed through 151
 emergence of 132
 evacuation of horse and family 87, 88, 89
 laptops, upgrading/distribution of used 87
 organization of 68, 157
 referrals made in 151
 responsiveness of 77–8
 roles 67–8, 81, 156, 157
 rules 77
 striving to remain hidden 83
 structuring of messages 66–7
 suitcase storage facilities 87
 systematicity of 77, 79
 opinion polls and consensus conferences 93, 94
 Ozon website 61, 62

P

parallel private clinics-based care system 27, 28, 34
 participant observation 144
 participation 6, 57, 131–4
 digitally enabled 6, 54, 57, 58
 ecologies of 55, 94, 154, 158

in non-democratic situations 55–6
 volunteering as means of 6
 patriotic volunteer initiatives and divided publics 100–22, 154
 animation of official ideological formulas by 115–22
 the enemy 118–22, 130
 ‘one people’ 115–18, 119–20, 130, 132
 as a form of public participation 121–2
 extending the Russian state through assistance provision
 beyond Russia 111–15, 121
 within Russia 107–11, 121
 firm orientation towards publicity 104–7
see also Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova; The Circle
 People For Peace 69–70, 71
 People’s Front 112
 persistence 9, 10
 personal message 61–2
 physicians, use of digital technologies by 23–4, 25–6, 27, 28–48, 49, 79, 80, 81 *see also* For Patients; Medical Support
 pilot studies/projects 19–20
 political action and activity type 19, 20
 political and civic or non-political participation 16, 53, 55
 political consumerism 54
 political engagement 134
 political expropriation 17
 politics
 as focused on electing or influencing government/state officials 53
 beyond the state 5, 15–17, 55
 of climate change 18
 definition of 22, 134
 detecting and doing 19
 rethinking 18–22
 situational 21
 state-centric understanding of 16, 20
 state’s monopoly on 17
 polyclinics 30, 35, 36, 37, 43, 45, 106
 post-nationalism, digitally facilitated 131
 privacy 73
 protest 54
 psychological care initiative 72–3 *see also* Vasilisa
 public
 imaginary of 93
 and war 7
 public healthcare system 34, 36, 37, 43, 45, 78
 public opinion, generation/extraction of 93
 public participation
 depublicization of 88, 89
 original project on 139–40
 public views and preferences 93, 94
 publics
 calculated 96, 97
 deeply divided 133–4

- in the digitalization era 96–9
- hashtags 97
- issue 93–5, 97
- nature of 93, 94–5
- Putin, Vladimir 104, 112, 115
- PVR *see* centres for
 - temporary accommodation
- Q**
- qualitative social science research 3–4, 142, 143–5, 148, 149
- questions, ethical and
 - methodological 139–61
- R**
- RECs *see* Research Ethics Committees
- reflexivity 4, 147
- relevant authorities, need to inform 143
- replicability 9, 10
- requests for aid
 - creation of a Google form for 64, 68
 - see also* requests for healthcare advice and assistance *under* For Patients
- research 58
 - digital media 96
- Research Ethics Committees (RECs) 140–1, 144–5, 146, 147, 148, 149
 - ethical reviews conducted by 141–2
- research methodology and ethical research
 - conduct 139, 140
- research participants, partnering with 142, 146–7
- resources
 - acquisition of 63, 73, 78, 80, 82–3, 84, 88, 108, 152
 - scarcity of 37, 111, 141
 - utilization of 32, 39, 78
- RF *see* Russian Federation
- risk register, systematic 148, 149
- risks, dealing with emergent and uncontrollable 84, 142, 146–50
- rules 79
 - security 146–7
 - see also* moderation rules *under* For Patients; rules *under* Another City chat; rules *under* On the Move initiative
- Russia 135, 155, 156, 157
 - accessing adequate healthcare in 49
 - ambivalence of state actors' usage of social media and digital technologies in 11
 - as portrayed in patriotic chats 159
 - assistance of people from Ukraine in 4–5, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 50, 61–5, 135, 140, 158
 - Border Region 100–1, 103, 104, 105, 110, 111, 112, 113, 116, 117, 118, 120
 - Directorate for Migration 109
 - resistance networks in 2
 - support volunteer initiatives in 1–3
- Russian
 - aggression/expansionism towards Ukraine 1, 11, 95, 107–8, 129–30, 132, 140, 154
 - army 77, 159
 - authorities 149
 - censorship legislation 11
 - citizenship 48
 - criminalization of independent war reporting 11
 - healthcare system 150–1 *see also* healthcare, politics of
 - identities 123, 158 *see also* Russianness
 - increase of online surveillance 12
 - laws, repressive 82, 144
 - national identities, alternative 7–8, 130, 158
 - research findings 147, 160
 - propaganda 12
 - security forces 147–8
- Russian Federation (RF) 116
- Russianness 7, 102–3, 123, 128, 129–30, 159, 160
- S**
- safety 67, 149
- sampling strategy 156
- Sasha 117–18
- scalability 9–10
- searchability 9, 10
- secrecy to avoid reprisal 82, 107
- self-censoring 145–6
- Sergey 69, 70–2
- shareability 10
- shared imaginaries of nationhood 7
- Signal 71
- situations, starting from 55
- slacktivism 58
- Slava 66
- social/state benefits payment 77, 104, 109, 110
- social media
 - data 160
 - platforms 8, 10, 59, 88, 96, 134
 - usage 1, 3, 9–11, 59, 65, 84, 99, 108, 152–3
 - wartime interference with 12
- sociomaterial collectives 98–9
- solidarity and grassroots agency, persistence of 149
- Soviet Union 55
- spaces, online and offline 97–8
- Special Military Operation *see* war in *under* Ukraine
- spectrums of difference in approach of
 - volunteer initiatives 76
 - degrees of visibility from public to hidden 76, 82–5, 107, 159
 - emphases from orderliness to spontaneity 76, 79–82

orientations from systematic to responsive 76–9, 111

state, positioning of patriotic volunteer initiatives in relation to the 107–15

state bureaucracies 16, 17, 109, 111, 114

status, official refugee or asylum seeker 35, 109, 110

subpolitics 16

T

Tamara 46–7

technologies of elicitation, use of 93

technoscientific developments 15–16

Telegram 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 23, 26, 27, 28, 35, 38, 39, 62, 135, 136, 148

affordances provided by 137

Application Programming Interface (API) 137

as appropriate technology

- actorness of 138
- agency of 138
- anonymity and security of 138
- fluidity of 137
- lack of fixed boundaries 137
- openness to tinkering 137
- responsiveness and flexibility of 138
 - as sociomaterial collective 99
- based group initiative 6
- bots 37, 45, 67, 80, 88, 104, 137
- channels 12, 67, 84, 85, 106, 153, 154, 157
- chats 39, 61, 63, 64, 65, 68, 70–1, 75, 84, 88, 100, 105, 106, 107, 109–10, 118, 121, 137, 140, 148, 150, 151, 153, 154, 157, 158, 159, 160
- handles 157
- interviews conducted through 156
- lack of firm bounding 137
- personal message on 75
- possibilities for integration with various external platforms 137

testosterone, studies of practices related to DIY 145–6

thematic analysis, juxtaposition of 161

threat of serious immediate harm 144

TikTok, restricting of 12

topical hashtag communities, formation of 97–8

transgender activists, community of 145

transit route of Ukrainian refugees through Russia to the EU 155

- assistance along 1, 4–5, 25–6, 39–40, 64, 68, 69, 71, 75, 77, 84–5, 87, 101, 111–12, 132, 153

transparency 4

triple test, politics of the 19–20, 22

trust 46

Tumblr 59

Twitter *see also* X

- hashtags 97–8

U

Ukraine

- provision of school supplies and school uniform to children in 110–11
- Russia as source of aid for 114
- war in 104, 111
- see also* transit route of Ukrainian refugees through Russia to the EU

Ukrainians

- call for unification with Russians 102
- entitlement of to one-time social benefits payment 108

unexpected findings 143–4

Union of Writers of Russia (UWR) 115

- provision of humanitarian aid and books 115

Unite chat 64, 65, 67, 68

- closure of 69

United Russia 112

United States 130

- Occupy protests (2011) 58–9

Up To Date 48

UWR *see* Union of Writers of Russia

V

Varvara 37, 44–5

Vasilisa 72–6, 88–9, 153, 155, 156

- functioning of in the absence of a sophisticated digital infrastructure 75–6
- relative exemption from rules 73
- reliance on going public for acquisition of resources 84–5
- responsiveness of 77
- use of situation-specific, impromptu teams 75–6

video calls 41

VK 12

Vladimir 27–8, 34, 35, 80

volunteer collectives 1–3, 6, 7–8

volunteer initiatives aimed at assisting people

- from Ukraine while in Russia 150, 151, 152, 153, 157
- as a public 132
- as alternative to direct engagement 134
- branching out of 87, 157
- country-wide (Russian) group 152, 153–4, 155
- local group 152, 154
- see also* Another City chat; Assistance Centre of Daria Fedorova; For Patients; On the Move initiative; The Circle

volunteer networks 157

- of resistance 133
- use of digital media by 8, 11, 23

volunteer work as public participation 132–3

volunteers

- individual 84, 152–3, 155, 157

INDEX

- acquisition of resources, reliance on going public for 84
 - media coverage of initiatives of 84
 - personal risk of high degree of visibility 84
 - patriotic 102
 - roles played by 156–7
 - state 102
 - Z– 102
- W**
- wartime volunteer initiatives 140, 141, 152
 - see also* volunteer initiatives aimed at assisting people from Ukraine while in Russia
- We are the 99%** 58
- websites 67, 153, 157
- WhatsApp 12
- world-in-common 22
- X**
- X 8, 59, 97, 98
- Y**
- YouTube 59, 108, 118
- Z**
- Zimbabwe Bush Pump B-type as appropriate technology 137

