

"THE LAWN IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE IS POLITICAL": (DE)POLITICIZATION OF URBAN ACTIVISM AFTER FEBRUARY 2022¹

JULIA SOLNEVA

ABSTRACT

The analysis examines how urban activists understand the political in their activities since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Based on participant observations and interviews with representatives of urban movements and initiatives (2022–2024), the research shows that current collective action in Russia can rarely be understood exclusively as either politicized or depoliticized. In different situations, activists can assign contradictory meanings to their actions. This apparent inconsistency and ambiguity enable them to persist within the Russian authoritarian context.

CITY AS A SPACE FOR POLITICAL STRUGGLE?

In research on social and urban movements, protest is often seen as an indispensable part of public life. Rallies and demonstrations, where citizens voice their demands to the state, represent a common form of political action. This is discussed, for instance, by scholars Dikeç and Swyngedouw (2017), who have put forward a concept of the politicizing city. In this theory, urban streets and squares serve as the space for justice demands, empowering those who oppose the established system with political agency. Activism, which implies uniting citizens around local issues, is criticized as insufficiently politicized since it does not lead to structural changes in state policies.

Conversations with activists in Russia, however, have repeatedly shown a different perception of politics. In October 2022, Yulia, who is involved in an urban greening initiative, explained her position as follows: *"Even the lawn in front of my house is political. For example, I cannot influence Putin in any way, but I can influence my neighborhood. And that's political, in the sense that you can try to get more people involved in this activity."* Such reasoning is often interpreted as an attempt to lend significance to apolitical activism that is unable to change the course of "big" politics. Indeed, local struggles in

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urban conflicts do not stop a state's military actions in another country. Nevertheless, a closer look at why political struggles continued to shift significantly to the local level in an authoritarian state at war reveals more nuanced picture. Seemingly apolitical local activism shows less obvious, complex, and multi-layered processes of the formation of civic subjectivity. From this perspective, local urban space creates an opportunity for people to unite and experience collective action when direct resistance to the regime through large-scale protests is not feasible.

The widespread prevalence of local activism compared to mass protests does not mean that there was no room for dissent in post-Soviet Russia. The Bolotnaya demonstrations of 2011–12 against the rigged elections and the environmental protests at Shies in 2018–2020, among many others, prove the opposite. However, since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, after large-scale rallies had almost completely disappeared from public space, other forms of resistance remain. Citizens opt for organizing solitary pickets, posting anti-war leaflets, hanging (often anonymously) posters with political statements, or laying flowers at monuments to victims of political repression (Dolinina & Uzhvak, 2023). People also continue to defend their neighborhoods and urban spaces from interference, protesting construction projects, tree felling, or deforestation (ibid.). This fragmentation of protest and focus on actions scattered in time and space is caused by the difficulty of practicing dissent. Public protest carries risks of detention, criminal punishment, prison terms, and police violence for activists, while threats and consequences have steadily increased over the past three years (OVD-Info, 2024). These risks precisely create the "impossibility" of influencing the system: the differences between democracies in terms of legal frameworks and state countermeasures have a considerable impact on the forms and practices of resistance (Gerschewski, 2013). In addition, urban activists in Russia face pressure from municipal, regional, and federal government authorities, even when they do not take a political or anti-war position but engage in local conflicts involving developers and business lobbies.

These developments of the political space in Russian cities profoundly differ from the idea of a "politicizing city," in which the political comes to the fore only when radical changes of the governmental system are publicly demanded. The empirical data on mobilization in Russian cities, presented below, show that politicized practices can emerge and persist even beyond explicit dissent. Moreover, they complement depoliticized actions without excluding them. Despite the evolving repressive measures and the risks increased since February 2022, activists in urban initiatives continue to maintain their attitude and positions. They are inclined to combine contradictory logics and switch between them depending on the context, while being aware of their limitations and possibilities for protest in urban space.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The analysis is based on participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of urban initiatives in Russian cities with large populations and a high density of urban conflicts: St. Petersburg, Kazan, and Perm. The initiatives were formed around protection of green spaces and preservation of historical heritage. Data collection took place in September–November 2022, March–July 2023, and March–April 2024, both in person and online.² It is important to note that the interlocutors did not hold pro-war positions. This limits the collected data to the views of activists who are predominantly critical of the Russian regime or neutral in their statements, which is reflected in their experience. Thus, the presented conclusions cover only a part of the urban protests that exist in Russia and do not include urban activists with other positions.

URBAN MOBILIZATION AFTER FEBRUARY 2022

Participation in collective action, advocacy for activists' interests, the opportunity to meet like-minded people, and learning about urban policy processes are experiences that activists gained even before 2022. This background allowed some activist infrastructures to survive and continue to exist over the past three years, albeit on a smaller scale. At the same time, February 24, 2022, was a turning point for representatives of urban movements, regardless of their level of political engagement. While the war does not seem to be directly related to the local actions of grassroots urban initiatives, it has nevertheless changed the landscape of urban activism in many ways. The exodus of activists abroad, whether voluntarily or under threat of persecution, the intensification of repressive strategies against protests, including urban ones, and partial reorientation of the activist community towards human rights and anti-war projects have greatly affected the ability to continue their work.

Following the period of silence, which was particularly evident in the initiatives in the first weeks after the war started and after the mobilization began in September 2022, many activists started to actively return to local urban issues in 2023. Formats were retested, often in a careful and depoliticized form due to perceptions of increased risks. In doing so, activists realized that positions could still be expressed, as long as statements on the war in Ukraine and the actions of the Russian government were omitted from public rhetoric. As a result, citizens mostly returned to the activities they practiced prior to 2022. Although activists continued to use similar forms of action, they integrated new meanings into their practices. Their actions testify that the shift towards greater or lesser

² Empirical data was collected independently in 2022–2023, and in 2024 as part of the project “Sustainable Urban Development: Agency, Networks, and Communication in Uncertain Times”.

politicization does not follow a linear trajectory: diverse actions can overlap and contradict each other, creating complex interconnections.

URBAN POLITICAL SPACE AND TIES WITHIN ACTIVIST GROUPS

Although protest street politics is widely considered a marker of the "true" politicization, the authoritarian context of Russia after 2022 presents a different picture. While politics has not completely disappeared from the streets, it has undergone a transformation in practices. In Russian cities, the heightened risk of repression and the near impossibility of broadcasting a broader political agenda condition the street space that shifts between de- or repoliticized meanings, depending on the situation. Activists can navigate the same urban space in different ways, either introducing or excluding political elements.

In one initiative, activists involved in saving a green space from a highway construction project drew attention to the problem by organizing workshops on DIY street furniture, botanical excursions, art festivals, and signing petitions to protect the area. Such activities, although aimed at opposing the decisions of urban politicians, remain local, which largely excludes criticism of the system itself. However, after 2022, informal festivals at the same location also provided a space for political and anti-war activities. Informal festivals included speeches by local opposition politicians, writing letters to political prisoners, and creating anti-war posters. In these moments, the space has been transformed into a more politicized one, introducing new statements alongside the local agenda. Since the community of the initiative was much more dispersed, activists with varying degrees of political engagement had the opportunity to accommodate meanings and practices with varying degrees of political engagement within the space.

In another activist community, the focus after February 2022 shifted to strengthening bonds among its participants rather than organizing public activities. This was partly due to a lack of understanding of how to communicate political positions publicly. Closer ties and trusting connections among members led to greater mutual concern for safety, especially as some participants sought to take a more visible anti-war stance. As a result, the initiative began to present itself as apolitical in public. Such situations show that the organizational structure of initiatives and closeness of their connections can significantly influence politicization of urban space itself.

LINKING POLITICAL EXPERIENCE AND LOCAL PROCESSES

Activists' politicization is not solely linked to participation in activities that publicly criticize the political regime. Many of my interview partners have been also involved in local activist initiatives, thus living through different experiences that at first glance may seem incompatible. For example, both before and after 2022, local activists have run as

independent deputies in elections or helped other politicians in their election campaigns, worked in human rights organizations, or were engaged in independent journalism. Since 2022, some activists have tended to combine their engagement in the protection of urban spaces and in anti-war and political projects, which they perceive as equally significant for them in building their civic and political positions.

Therefore, different levels of politicization are not mutually exclusive but rather overlap and complement each other. Activists can choose which of their experiences they prefer to make visible and which ones to keep hidden. For example, one of my interlocutors, Pavel, who had regularly taken part in rallies in support of Alexey Navalny, decided to use his protest experience after 2022 in another sphere. He considers growing plants with teenagers in the urban garden, of which he is a member, not only a civic practice and ecological education, but also an alternative to the “patriotic” and militarized education in schools. In this case, environmental informal practices offer schoolchildren a chance to spend time in spaces that are, to some extent, free from state control. For activists, these activities mean a resistance to indoctrination in the educational system, which has intensified since the war in Ukraine began.³

As one can see, in some situations, activists are willing to act politically. In others, the same people prefer seemingly apolitical forms of activism that yet are not at odds with their core beliefs and civic stance.

CONVICTIONS AND POLITICIZATION OF ACTIVISTS' VIEWS

The changes brought by the war and its consequences have also influenced how urban politics is perceived and interpreted by activists. Maria shared her concerns about the tree felling in her beloved neighborhood in the following way:

"It's like a rape. That means they can take our environment away from us by force at any time, just like that. And they tell us that instead of this environment we loved [...] there will be a sidewalk or a street lamp. [...] Someone up there just decides it. [...] And it seems to me that this is a great evil, that it's politically a great evil. Because with these small incidents involving green spaces, it's very similar to what happens with the war, yes. Everything has been decided for all of us."

The statement illustrates how an anti-war stance can be expressed as emotional dissatisfaction with urban development projects. Maria draws a connection between

³ The editor's comment: See, for example, issue no. 445 of *Russland-Analysen* on the topic of “indoctrination” (<https://laender-analysen.de/russland-analysen/445/>) or issue no. 463 on the topic of “academic freedom” (<https://laender-analysen.de/russland-analysen/463/>).

urban politics that threatens her familiar environment and interprets it as a violent act linked to higher-level politics. In interviews and conversations, other activists share similar reasoning: they engage in urban protests out of their conviction that local actions reflect global political issues. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has also further motivated their resistance at the local level.

Although activists acknowledge their limited influence over politicians' actions, they do not disavow political discussions. They do not consider such talks inappropriate or irrelevant. Instead, they view the involvement in urban initiatives as part of their political experience. While activists rarely reflect this position publicly, they still able to articulate participation in local activism as part of political subjectivation in more private talks. Through this process, they gradually gradually become aware of their own agency and beging to engage in a nascent process of civic engagement.

DEALING WITH THE POLICE ORDER: INTERACTION WITH STATE OFFICIALS

The idea of a politicizing city implies that dissatisfied citizens openly express their disagreement with the ruling regime, often referred to as the “police order” (Dikeç & Swyngedouw, 2017), and demand its radical restructuring. As long as urban residents remain invisible and unrecognized by those in power, they lack real leverage for change. What is often overlooked in this discussion, however, is the intrinsic complex relationship that emerges between dissatisfied citizens and state authorities. State representatives are influential players in urban politics, as they accumulate significant resources that impact decision-making and urban conflicts' outcome. As a result, urban activists in Russia frequently turn to politicians at various levels to advance their demands, employing strategies ranging from cooperation to open criticism and public resistance. When it comes to cooperation with governmental structures, activists interpret and explain their motives for interaction in various ways. Some informants describe collaboration with state authorities as a way to redistribute state resources and power to achieve “good” and “right” goals in urban politics. One activist explains: *“If we don’t approach the local administrations with our request first, they will simply direct these funds toward what we all fear the most [referring to military infrastructure].”*

Furthermore, a critical attitude toward state institutions does not always lead to outright rejection of cooperation. Activists might be sceptical of the regime yet still hold the view that collaboration is necessary. Representatives of the “police state” can be perceived differently depending on the situation. For example, public participation in events with party symbols and flags of “United Russia”, the ruling political party, is generally considered unacceptable. Conversely, engaging in “constructive dialogue” through working meetings with city officials, who are also party members, can be appropriate if it alignes with the goals of an initiative. While public partnership with “United Russia” is deemed impossible, the officials during cabinet meetings are assigned a depoliticized role

of an expert or civil servant who fulfills a specific governmental function, making such interactions accepted by activists.

Moreover, my interview partners often regard contact with representatives of the “police order” as a legitimate political action: *“If all active people refuse to cooperate with [officials], nothing will change for those in power. [...] They will simply remain isolated from the people.”* Thus, working with the city government representatives is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate control over their decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

Empirical observations of grassroots initiatives after 2022 once again demonstrate that activist groups are not monolithic entities whose actions can be characterized as either politicized or depoliticized. Activists tend to shift between different strategies and modes, oscillating between acts of resistance and “harmless” pragmatic formats, between publicity and invisibility, or between necessary cooperation with and opposition to state institutions. The constantly changing conditions and increasing state control often coerce participants of urban initiatives to adjust the degree of politicization in their activities. In many cases, their formats and practices do not complement but contradict one another. Paradoxically, such inconsistency allows initiatives to persist, remain flexible and continue their activities in Russia after 2022.

Therefore, urban activism in Russia should not be simplistically viewed as genuinely political or devoid of politics. Insufficient attention to local networks, practices and interactions in post-2022 Russia, including those in urban spaces, can lead to public demands that force the binary choice: either to resist or comply with the Russian regime, which is often combined in the reality. Understanding the conditions and dilemmas faced by activists and civil society actors as they express dissent and navigate obstacles to their resistance can provide insights into how authoritarianism functions in everyday life, and how it changes over time (for more on the topic, see Zhelnina, 2023).

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About the author

Julia Solneva is a pseudonym. She holds an MA in urban studies. Her research focuses on social movements and grassroots initiatives, collective action, and urban governance.