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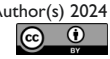
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Organizing Counterpublics: Scenes from Contemporary Russia

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Abstract
Writings on counterpublics, publicness and the public realm present a theoretical and empirical dialectic of a public sphere in the singular and multiple counterpublics. We update and relocate this interplay by situating our paper in present-day Russia and the protests against the invasion of Ukraine. Through exemplary scenes of counterpublicness, and drawing upon Russian and Western scholarship, we develop a notion of counterpublics as a minimal condition of organization understood as the collective capacity to act. If the public sphere designates a controlled theatre for the organization of social experience, then the self-organized and dispersed struggle to enable moments of publicness keeps alive and rehearses political organizing under dire conditions.

Keywords
counterpublics, organization, protest, public sphere, resistance, Russia, self-organization

Introduction

In November 2023 a Russian court sentenced Aleksandra Skochilenko to seven years in prison for violating the recent and notorious law on 'Public Dissemination, Under the Guise of Reliable Statements, of Deliberately False Information About the Use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation'. In a supermarket, Skochilenko had swapped price tags for pieces of paper containing information about army operations in Ukraine and brief reflections on public propaganda and the population's readiness to assent. '"Putin has been lying to us from television screens for 20 years: the result of these lies is our readiness to justify the war and the senseless deaths", read one of the altered price tags, which prosecutors declared dangerous to Russian society and the state' (Roth, 2023: n.p.).

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Skochilenko's case, one of many in contemporary Russia, sheds a bleak light on the state of Russia's public sphere, and on the fate of those who try to speak out.[1] It exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between the organizational principle of the public sphere and the bravery and ingenuity of organizing counterpublics under repressive conditions. A counterpublic, Michael Warner wrote in his *Publics and Counterpublics*, comes together through self-organized 'scenes of association' and participation, which are scenes of struggle 'over the conditions that bring them together as a public' (Warner, 2002: 57, 12). Such publics are often fraught, ephemeral, and temporary, hinging upon the circulation of texts – or images, sounds, colours, and objects – among strangers. They constitute, or so we argue in this paper, a minimal yet vital condition of social organization understood as 'the collective capacity to act' (Nunes, 2021: 11).

Alongside recent reconsiderations of the public sphere in light of its new and old (infra)structural transformations (Eisenegger and Schäfer, 2023; Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022), the notion of counterpublics is usually offered as antidote and corrective to assumptions of a unitary and universalized realm of public deliberation. As Miriam Hansen wrote in relation to Negt and Kluge's foundational reflections on what they called the 'proletarian public sphere', '[o]nce the public sphere is defined as a horizon for the organization of social experience, it follows that there are multiple and competing counterpublics'. These would be characterized by specific relations of exclusion, and they would constitute nuclei 'for an alternative organization of society' (Hansen, 1993: 207; see Negt and Kluge, 1993 [1972]: xliii).[2] In broad terms, then, scholarship on counterpublics and the public realm presents an interplay or dialectic of a public sphere in the singular (usually modelled on Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) and invariably plural counterpublics. The latter's constitution is predicated on, and might reconfigure, the former: the public sphere's norms and operations, who it excludes and marginalizes (Fraser, 1990).[3] This dialectic is both theoretical and empirical: 'On a theoretical level, the concept [of counterpublics] denounces the public sphere as imperfect, incomplete, or, more fatally, delusional; on an empirical level, counterpublics denounce the taken-for-granted societal arrangements, challenge current normativities, and push the social imagination to conjure up new political possibilities' (Brouwer and Paulesc, 2017: 80).

Following Negt and Kluge's intuition and taking heed of the rich landscape of investigations into the dialectic between public sphere and counterpublics (and what forms the 'counter' in counterpublics might take; see Asen, 2000), we seek to both update and relocate the question of counterpublics as alternative organizational forms by situating our paper in present-day Russia and its moments of protest and resistance against the war in Ukraine. How can we describe and understand the emergence of counterpublics that seek to uphold a collective capacity to reflect and communicate under fraught and repressive conditions? What are the infrastructural and spatio-temporal modes of organizing that mark and constitute such publics? And what implications can we tentatively draw for theorizing counterpublics?

In the following, we position and contextualize our endeavour in the literature on the history and present of the Russian public sphere, its shape, demise or, for some,

non-existence. On this basis, we turn to the notion of counterpublics from within the Russian context. While the dialectic of the public sphere and counterpublics has 'become part of our underlying assumptions about the world' (Brouwer and Paulesc, 2017: 79), we need to reflect on the transfer of assumptions and models of the public sphere and its counterpublics to non-Western regions and settings (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2017; Huang and Kang, 2022). We then present exemplary scenes taken from an ongoing empirical study of contemporary anti-war expressions in Russia and their fragile, risky and sometimes ingenious practices of upholding a collective capacity to act, perceive and think. We conclude by offering the contours of a theory of counterpublics as predicated on a processual notion of publicness – that is closer to the German term of *Öffentlichkeit* than its English translation of 'public sphere' – as self-organized and unanchored in institutional or organizational templates or forms, as materially and technologically mediated, as spatially and temporally dispersed, and as performatively enacted.

Russia and the Public Sphere

To ponder the emergence and organizational modes of counterpublicness in present-day Russia, it behoves us to first outline the discussion of the Russian public sphere. The literature on this topic was catalysed by the mass protests of 2011–12 during the 'For Fair Elections' campaign.[4] Discussing the field of alternative professional journalism, Lazitsky (2021) summarizes three perspectives on the contemporary Russian public sphere. The first denies the possibility that Russia ever had a functional public sphere, instead characterizing it as a deliberately 'staged' and 'performed' one, which assigns the population the passive role of spectators in 'a parade of legitimations' (Negt and Kluge, 1993 [1972]: 74). Recalling Habermas's warning to not conflate the bourgeois public sphere with 'plebiscitary-acclamatory' forms of a 'regimented public sphere characterizing dictatorships in highly developed industrial societies', yet also updating his diagnosis of a late modern acclamatory public sphere as staged and manipulated (1989 [1962]: 211), present-day Russia's personalist autocracy (Mazorenko, 2017), also called patronal presidentialism (Langenohl and Schmäing, 2020), does not aim to eradicate the public sphere but control and manipulate it.[5]

A second, more optimistic view detects signs of a more open public sphere already in Soviet times, with a nascent civil society and (somewhat) independent journalism. A third perspective recognizes the existence of a (short-lived) golden age of post-Soviet publicness until the mid-1990s, which produced a broader range of opportunities for citizens to participate in political debates. Its demise was connected to the economic crisis that curbed print media and assured the rise of television, which became 'an arena where financial and political groups vied for influence' (Lazitsky, 2021: 292), while the general population was left to focus on self-preservation and survival.

These distinctions have strong Habermasian undertones. They seem to offer a time-lapse reenactment of the bourgeois public sphere's ascent from acclamatory publics, performing uncritical assent, to a lively, critical-rational public discourse, and then to its refeudalization and demise towards 'the staged and manipulative effectiveness of a publicity aimed at rendering the broad population [. . .] infectiously ready for acclamation' (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 211).[6] In the recent Russian context, the diagnosis of a merely

acclamatory public sphere can be related to developments such as centralization of media control (Chebankova, 2011; Weiser, 2020), valorisation of the private sphere, state propaganda (Snegovaya, 2015), co-option through transfer of ownership (Langenohl and Schmäing, 2020; Morris et al., 2023; Snegovaya, 2015), and censorship and self-censorship (Snegovaya, 2015).

To conclude, identifying the existence of a 'proper' public sphere even in ephemeral, truncated, and temporary form entails the diagnosis and discussion of its decay (Etkind, 2015). For instance, shortly after the 'For Fair Elections' events, Russia adopted amendments to the public assembly law, i.e. the rules governing the organization of public protests and the consequences and fines when failing to meet them. In a further 2016 amendment, all kinds of public activity were defined as political, thus rendering any kind of collective assembling in public vulnerable (Fröhlich and Jacobsson, 2019). Further laws and regulations on public assembly implemented during the COVID-19 period were utilized to suppress dissenting mobilizations (Holod, 2024). Today, as Meyer-Olimpieva writes, 'open anti-war protests in any form are akin to self-sacrifice or social suicide' (2023: 8).

Apathy, Organizational Trauma and Small Deeds

In this situation, Western perceptions that there would be so little public resistance both hit a mark and ring a little hollow. We argue here that the acclamatory and staged Russian public sphere needs to be understood as imbricated with dispersed, tactical and sometimes seemingly nonpolitical activities of counterpublics. We can only note in passing that there is a larger historical point to be made – a longue durée of counterpublicness, as it were – that cannot be captured by merely focusing on present-day Russia. Consider the tropes of depoliticization and its affects of apathy and indifference (Clément, 2015). For one, they need to be placed in the context of modern Russian's 'culture of political avoidance' (Morris et al., 2023). Affects of apathy and indifference and their seeming corollary of depoliticization represent an extension of attitudes and behavioural patterns that had emerged during the socialist era in Soviet Russia, such as the reliance on social ties and the importance of everyday and small-scale practices of self-organization (Baća, 2022), alongside 'mass disengagement from political participation' and an aversion against forced collectivism, resulting in what has been called an 'ethics of non-participation' (Zhuravlev et al., 2014: 448). With Nunes (2021), we might speak of an 'organizational trauma' (not exclusive to authoritarian and post-Soviet contexts but also penetrating the fabric of left Western activism), which signifies an aversion against thinking civic association in organizational terms due to the fear of power abuse, excessive verticality, rigid regulations, and a lack of transparency.

Then and now, however, depoliticization has never negated the need for and practice of collective solidarity.[7] Disappointment in mass political action in the aftermath of the 'For Fair Elections' campaign propelled the search for different ways of engagement and participation that could elude organizational trauma and minimize the likelihood of being struck by repressions (Fröhlich and Jacobsson, 2019; Zhuravlev et al., 2019). The resulting shift to – or rather the return of – more individualized forms of grassroots self-organization and civic engagement was termed the 'small deeds doctrine' (Zhuravlev

et al., 2014: 462), which extends beyond dissident milieus to include, for example, civil initiatives aimed at supporting Russian soldiers (Meyer-Olimpieva, 2023). The small deeds doctrine enables 'nominally apolitical' individuals (Baća, 2022: 11) to engage in civic action without committing to social or political movements and at a distance from collective authority. Such action might constitute 'an innovative form of political participation' (Zhuravlev et al., 2014: 462), enabling 'moments of publicness' (Kavada and Poell, 2021) within 'arenas of discursive interaction' (Lazitsky, 2021: 295), or what political philosopher Greg Yudin has called 'enclaves' of publicness (Journal Gefter, 2017).

Trying to make sense of these phenomena and our empirical findings of current ways of making dissent public is then not primarily a question of the public sphere (in the singular) and its staging and manipulation. It summons the question of how counterpublics emerge, operate and hang together under severe repression, when participating in public assemblies poses a risk of self-sacrifice. This is a context in which the Western notion of the public sphere and its institutional settings has only limited purchase. In this sense, Alyukov (2014) has drawn upon Negt and Kluge's notion of counterpublics as mediators and producers of alternative social experiences to reflect on the Russian context of publicness. In the following, we offer a few selected scenes from the recent anti-war initiatives, ranging from para-institutional practices of obstruction to small deeds of resistance, to illustrate and discuss how such experiences are produced and circulated.

Counterpublic Scenes

Letters to Political Prisoners

In response to the tragic news of Alexey Navalny's passing in confinement, several Russian independent media outlets articulate the prevailing sense of defeat and helplessness: 'What is to be done now?' A primary recommended practice involves the support of Russian political prisoners (see DOXA, 2024), whose estimated numbers reach into the hundreds.[8] Currently, the practice of corresponding with inmates and detainees gains traction as a legally permissible, safe, and easily adaptable form of civic engagement across a broad spectrum of anti-war initiatives and beyond (from domestic guerrilla groups engaged in sabotage to expat communities and human rights organizations), constituting a counterpublic circulation of texts among strangers and expressing 'an affective desire for copresence and collaboration' (Chesters and Welsh, 2005: 188). One can participate in group letter-writing evenings in a variety of 'third places' in Russia and abroad, access online knowledge bases providing guidance on letter-writing, including strategies for circumventing prison censorship, or utilize crowd-funded services such as 'RosUznik', that cover logistical and postage expenses, or 'SVOBOT!', a Telegram chatbot which maintains a database of inmate correspondence addresses.

Mobilization

Offering 'nonviolent civic resistance' (Gvindadze, 2023), 'Idite Lesom' leverages the dual meaning of the phrase. Literally, it translates as 'go by the forest', suggesting the

idea of navigating hidden paths and an underground network which enable Russians who have received military summons to dodge mobilization or flee abroad. However, the phrase can also be interpreted colloquially as a permissible way of telling somebody to 'get lost', expressing defiance towards the authorities responsible for mobilization. The 'Go by the Forest' network offers free consultations and produces instructional material. A common piece of advice is 'to become the most inconvenient conscript who knows their rights and is ready to defend them' (Go by the Forest, 2022). Similarly, '*Prisiv k Sovesty*' (Appeal to Consciousness) – a coalition of lawyers promoting the right to object to military service – offers suggestions on how to 'complicate every step of the process of sending you to war' (Appeal to Consciousness, 2022), such as denying communication with representatives of the military who do not identify themselves, refusing to sign any papers, submitting complaints and, if threatened with confiscation of personal communication devices, 'speak[ing] loudly into the receiver: "If my connection is interrupted, it means [full name, position] is obstructing telephone communication, exceeding their authority"' (Appeal to Consciousness, 2022).

Italian Strike

Political scientist Alexander Kynev has identified two distancing strategies as the prevalent protest tactics in Russia. Direct distancing encompasses emigration, whereas indirect distancing entails sabotage, obstruction, stalling, non-compliance, or outright disregard for state directives (Kynev, 2022). '*Antivoenij Bolnichnij*' (The Anti-War Sick Leave) advocates so-called Italian strikes, which involve applying a set of rules and practices to intentionally disrupt production and slow it down. The point of the Italian strike is twofold. It is seen as a method of exercising pressure on the state by 'cutting off its oxygen' with minimal organizational effort: 'We are not the media, not political analysts, not a party cell. We are just people looking for new ways to protest against a war that nobody needs' (Anti-War Sick Leave, 2022b). The initiative underlines the performative value of claiming a dispersed collective agency despite staying largely under the radar: 'They'll tell us this action isn't spectacular. The BBC won't make a report about it, so you won't be able to tell the whole world to what extent Russians are against the war. But we'll say that we shouldn't think about visibility, we should think about the cause' (Anti-War Sick Leave, 2022b).

Undercover Agitation

In the aftermath of the anti-mobilization street protests in September 2022 that failed to attract a large presence yet resulted in mass detentions (Meduza, 2022), the youth movement 'Vesna', which used to promote and coordinate street protest through a network of local chats, posted that 'serious mass actions require serious preparation' (Movement Vesna, 2022a). Yet this could no longer be achieved through conventional organizational means. It called for 'new forms of protest and resistance', such as collective agitation formed 'from leaflets and graffiti to conversations with family members', in particular targeting those who are 'not interested in politics' (Movement Vesna, 2022a). This would, or so they hoped, disrupt the mobilization campaign, which was announced by Putin in September 2022, and

foster a stronger sense of opposition to the state. This included educating a broader segment of the population on how to avoid conscription, for instance by using residential chat groups – a common means of communication between residents of multi-storey buildings in Russia – to warn neighbours about drafting officers entering their residential complex, and by circulating a set of 'rules of interaction with the police and military enlistment office' (Movement Vesna, 2022b). The tactic of constituting a counterpublic through local communities, and in a comparably neutral tone so as to avoid raising suspicion, is also recommended by other groups, such as the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) and their quest to form a 'cyber squad against mobilization' (Feminist Anti-War Resistance [FAR], 2022).

Anti-War Routes

In October 2022 an Instagram account called 'peaceful_spb' published screenshots of 'Anti-War Routes'. The images were made by tracing a person's movement with GPS through the Strava mobile app. The initiative was noticed by the Telegram channel '#Ochnis!' (or '#WAKE UP!'), which draws up and circulates a step-by-step guide on how to perform an 'Anti-War Route': First, choose a symbol or a slogan to draw by tracing the geolocation history of one's movement through the streets. Second, make a screenshot, delete its metadata, and share it with one of the Telegram channels through their submission bot. The action is described as 'a great way to express an anti-war stance without the risks' (#WAKE UP!, 2022). Additionally '#WAKE UP!' provides a security protocol for combining the walk with other means of protest, like spreading stickers and flyers, 'or other things that you might "accidentally" forget along the way' (#WAKE UP!, 2022).

Anti-War Banknotes

Around April 2022, several protest groups started sharing ideas about anti-war statements on banknotes (Feminist Anti-War Resistance [FAR], 2023; Media Partisans, 2022). A post recalls the case of protesters employing this practice in Turkmenistan in 2020, presenting it as an effective, relatively accessible, safe, and longer-lasting tool of anonymous protest that could potentially provoke a response in different population groups. The post also offers instructions on how to withdraw money safely to reduce the probability of being traced: withdraw cash, write slogans on it, use it for transactions, get smaller change, and repeat until you run out of bills. After several transactions, the post claims, the original creator of the inscription will be untraceable. And if you get caught with such a bill in hand, pretend '[that] you do not know anything, since the bill came to you in this form' (Media Partisans, 2022). Additionally, one is advised to sign bills only on one side to facilitate the transaction and keep it inconspicuous: 'when transferring bills from hand to hand, do not focus on the inscription (stretch out the bill with the unsigned side up). Open conflicts are not the goal of this form of protest' (Media Partisans, 2022).

Weak Counterpublics and the Collective Capacity to Act

Meyer-Olimpieva (2023) has identified four characteristics of social mobilization around the anti-war cause: its local character, its informal mode of operation, its reliance on

digital infrastructures and its trans-border constitution. Reflecting on the scenes sketched above and in dialogue with theories and studies of counterpublics, we can expand this analysis into an understanding of weak counterpublics that organize and perform a collective capacity to act under fraught and oppressive conditions.

First, *publicness as process*: In Nancy Fraser's words, counterpublics are 'parallel discursive arenas' where counterdiscourses are invented and circulated (Fraser, 1990: 67). Yet as the Russian context and our scenes show, such counterdiscourses are much less fixed and stable than the notion of subaltern counterpublics seems to imply. As illustrated above, the fleeting, temporary practices of circulation cannot be tied to specific demographic, gendered, or otherwise discriminative criteria of a community. Russia is known for the marginalization of groups that we might classify as subaltern in relation to its acclamatory, managed, monolithic, and homogenized public sphere, such as, for example, LBGTQ+ (Human Rights Watch, 2023) and 'non-white' or 'non-Russian' ethnic groups (Baranova and Darieva, 2023). However, the counterpublic practices we encountered do not 'simply reflect identities formed elsewhere'; in addressing strangers, they are 'in excess of [their] known social basis' (Warner, 2002: 57, 74). They constitute neither weak nor strong publics in Fraser's sense of civil society associations dealing in 'weak' opinion-formation or 'strong' representative and authoritative decision-making (Fraser, 1990: 75). Lacking formal organization, institutional protection, let alone parliamentary representation, and operating under constant threat, they are weak by default. They lack 'any institutional being' (Warner, 2002: 68) yet seek to uphold and perform a collective capacity to act. This is publicness as process, or 'publicness in motion' (Kavada and Poell, 2021: 4), a continuous and risky struggle to make things public and circulate them.

Second, *self-organization*: In the longer history of Russian counterpublicness and in the current anti-war initiatives, the idiom and ethos of self-organization are part and parcel of counterpublic conduct. Yet this kind of self-organization differs from imaginaries of collective organizing freed from hierarchical and managerial structures. Out of existential necessity, these are often individual, solitary actions that, in their connection to similar 'small deeds', amount to a fragile collective capacity to act based on loose ties and stranger relationality. Such self-organization offers moments of stability, communicative exchange and affective cohesion, yet it is marked by a changeability of practices and modes of relation in response to threats. This affirms Warner's emphasis on the self-organized constitution of counterpublics which might engage with para-institutional practices – such as arguing for your rights in a military commissariat – but do not have stable organizational forms at their disposal. They have to make do with creating themselves 'independently of state institutions, laws, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions' (Warner, 2002: 68). Their mode of publicness often takes shape under conditions of limited publicity, of operating in secret, and of trying to protect those who speak, write or perform.

Third, counterpublics are *tied to various material and technological mediations and practices*. This prominently entails the affordances of networked communication and social media, notably Telegram channels. Morris et al. (2023) highlight the importance of disseminating knowledge and action frames through social media to amass a capacity to challenge state narratives and promote grassroots mobilization. In this sense, it has been

argued that internet-based publics have served as the basis for the formation of counterpublics both on- and offline (Alyukov, 2014). In the face of increased state surveillance, which makes dissemination itself punishable, counterpublics find ways to continue circulating information, often through transnational networks and technical workarounds. What once were the printing machines of Samizdat that clandestinely produced pamphlets and books is now facilitated by smartphones and social media platforms.

Yet the fragile and risky state of networked communication means that the current emergence of counterpublics cannot be reduced to social media, 'networked publics' (Boyd, 2014), 'networked counterpublics' (Penney and Dadas, 2014) or an 'online counterpublic sphere' (Milioni, 2009), as often suggested in new media and communication studies (Castells, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Skochilenko's paper tags or anti-war banknotes constitute publicness in motion, too. The self-organization of communication and circulation hinges upon networked and encrypted communication channels *and* all sorts of everyday material affordances. Paraphrasing Noortje Marres, we might call the ensuing organizational ensembles 'material counterpublics'. The variability and amorphousness of our examples confirm Marres' point that organizing by means of such objects makes publics particularly ephemeral or fluid: 'Material publics should be expected to consist of strangers who do not have at their disposal shared locations, vocabularies and habits for the resolution of common problems' (Marres, 2012: 46).

Fourth, current Russian counterpublicness is *marked by spatial and temporal dispersion*. The study of counterpublic and contentious forms of expression tends to focus on visible performances like street protests, large-scale social media campaigns, and open political challenges (e.g. Butler, 2018; Castells, 2012; Clover, 2016). Such accounts are usually – implicitly or explicitly – guided by assumptions of the availability of public space to be contested and appropriated. While putting bodies in the streets and on squares constitutes powerful (and powerfully mediated) scenes of association (to be witnessed, for instance, in the aftermath of Alexey Navalny's death), counterpublic dissent in Russia faces significantly reduced opportunities of expression, where appropriating public space results in existential danger. Eschewing permanent coordination centers or identifiable leaders, moments of publicness are often spatially unbounded and fuse with everyday practices of moving through the city. They are based on slowing down production or the anonymous circulation of bills or price tags, on educating people on their rights or writing letters to strangers. Such counterpublicness prioritizes secrecy and anonymity while simultaneously seeking to leave inconspicuous yet recognizable traces. Spatial metaphors like arenas, theatres or enclaves of counterpublicness cannot quite capture the self-organized and often isolated yet nationally and transnationally connected attempts to address an indefinite group of strangers. This spatial dispersion is interwoven with a temporal one. Counterpublics have been said to create their own temporalities and rhythms, tied to the objects and technologies of circulation at their disposal (Warner, 2002: 97–8). But the processes of dispersed, self-organized publicness do not follow a specific temporal script. This is of course related to the continuous availability of networked communication and its mesh of synchronous and asynchronous exchange. But it also involves the intentional desynchronization of ephemeral and localized scenes of association and circulation, a way to stay under the radar yet make one's voice or writing heard, seen, read and felt.

Fifth, our brief scenes and the larger collection of ephemeral acts of protest and dissent testify to what Warner, referring to the circulation of counterpublic texts among strangers, calls 'poetic world making' (Warner, 2002: 14). Working in different media, and with heterogenous, often profane materials amounts to a 'poesis of scene making' (Warner, 2002: 122) that seeks to convey information and provoke critical reflexivity. However, this practice often does not and cannot conform to Habermasian notions of a public use of reason and rational-critical debate, as has often been pointed out in work on subaltern, affective, and networked publics (Papacharissi, 2015). In Negt and Kluge's terms, the materially, temporally and spatially dispersed counterpublics rely on productions of experience, perhaps on momentary and creative reappropriations of everyday encounters and their representations, which work through performative ploys and affective resonances just as much as through circulating texts and images. This kind of (counter) experience is nourished and held together by affects of concealment, anonymity, and collusion as well as laughter, mockery, and derision.

Conclusion

Alongside and in dialectical relation to the normative concept of the public sphere – and its 'charisma as a repository of democratic visions' (Brouwer and Paulesc, 2017: 78) – the notion of the counterpublic has become a supple, traveling concept that circulates through a broad range of scholarly inquiries, also in relation to non-Western contexts. Irreducible to formal organizations or social movements, this concept has perhaps become especially useful for studying oppositional activities and initiatives under authoritarian conditions 'where a more open, luxurious version of a public sphere is officially prohibited' (Brouwer and Paulesc, 2017: 83) and where established organizational templates or forms are unavailable. Our inquiry into present-day Russia and its staged, controlled, and acclamatory public sphere sought to show how counterpublics take shape under conditions of severe repression and a general climate of distrust. We recounted exemplary scenes to illustrate how brave and nimble – para-institutional, obstructive and resistant – acts seek to uphold a collective capacity to circulate and make present anti-war sentiments and arguments. Reflecting these scenes and the wider Russian context in dialogue with (both Russian and Western) discussions of how counterpublics come into being and operate, we suggest rethinking and expanding our understanding of them through five characteristics. First, publicness is to be apprehended as a continuous process of struggle. Second, counterpublicness emerges through practices of informal and often clandestine or anonymous self-organization – in this sense akin to how secrecy and secret societies were indispensable for the rise of the bourgeois public sphere (Beyes, 2022) – yet without institutional or even without a coordinative base. Third, counterpublics are shaped by often mundane objects of material and technological mediation (where clear-cut distinctions between on- and offline publics and prioritizing social media over everyday objects of writing, circulation and affect make little sense). Fourth, such counterpublicness is spatially and temporally dispersed without discernible rhythms or preferred sites, since any kind of appropriation of 'public' space poses existential risks. Fifth, these kinds of weak, temporary ties are loosely held together by an inventive and sometimes ingenious performativity of scene-making, which works through humour, play and irony to enable a fraught reappropriation of collective experience.

To return to Negt and Kluge's point, if the public sphere is an impoverished, controlled, and manipulated theatre for the organization of social experience, then the ongoing, self-organized and dispersed struggle to still (and fleetingly) enable moments of publicness through both encrypted communication channels and everyday materials of circulation constitutes an experimental field for an alternative organization of social experience. In organizational terms, such counterpublics present the minimal condition of a collective capacity to act. In their diverse and dispersed manifestations, they do not add up to organizational forms of protest, social movements or civic associations. In the case of Russia, one hopes that they are rehearsing and prefiguring a more stable and less endangered organized agency to come. We believe they constitute an ecology of organization in Nunes' sense (Nunes, 2021), where a plurality of often ephemeral and transient forms and practices, open to different agents in different positions and at different scales, is not seen as a challenge to be overcome but a pragmatic strength and a way to keep alive and even sustain political organizing under dire conditions. In this sense, our observations and findings might not only hold for the Russian context but offer a way to think and study – elsewhere, and in more general terms – how the organizational principle of the public sphere is undercut, loosened and potentially transformed by manifold organizational forms and practices of counterpublics.

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Notes

1. In early August 2024, Skochilenko was released from prison as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and the West, the biggest of its kind since the Cold War (Walker and Sauer, 2024).
2. Negt and Kluge refer to Habermas's notion of the 'plebeian public sphere' that he acknowledged yet bracketed in limiting his foundational study to a 'stylized picture' of 'the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere', which would have attained dominance in the 18th and 19th centuries (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: xviii–xix).
3. This dialectic harks back to the prehistory of publicness as predicated on secrecy and secret societies, where 'counterpublicness' arguably constitutes the public sphere's original scene (Beyes, 2022), as 'publicity had to be gained in opposition to the secret policy of the monarchs' (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 201).
4. The 'For Fair Elections' campaign in Russia emerged in response to alleged electoral fraud and irregularities, particularly during the parliamentary elections in December 2011. It sparked widespread protests across the country, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets to demand electoral reforms and greater political transparency.
5. Preserving the public sphere under centralized control is connected to the need to maintain a steady and credible picture of popular support of the national leader. Moreover, the existence of nominally democratic institutions (parties, elections, parliament) allows the regime to co-opt potential oppositional forces and turn them into accomplices (Langenohl and Schmäing, 2020). A similar co-option strategy is used to subjugate apolitical and non-state actors (Fröhlich und Jacobsson, 2019).
6. Habermas explicitly limited his inquiry to the British, French and German contexts. Yet what he called 'certain traits in common', such as shared orientation towards publicity and 'the

fiction of the one public' (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 56), turned the notion of the public sphere into a travelling concept, an 'engine of translatability, putting down new roots wherever it goes' (Warner, 2002: 11).

7. As has been shown with regard to counter-hegemonic collectives beyond the Russian context, for instance, depoliticization is intrinsically connected to politicization through the development of interpersonal trust (Husted and Just, 2022).
8. See the list of political prisoners, available at: https://memopzk.org/list-persecuted/spisok-politzaklyuchyonnyh-bez-presleduemyh-za-religiyu/ (accessed 22 February 2024).

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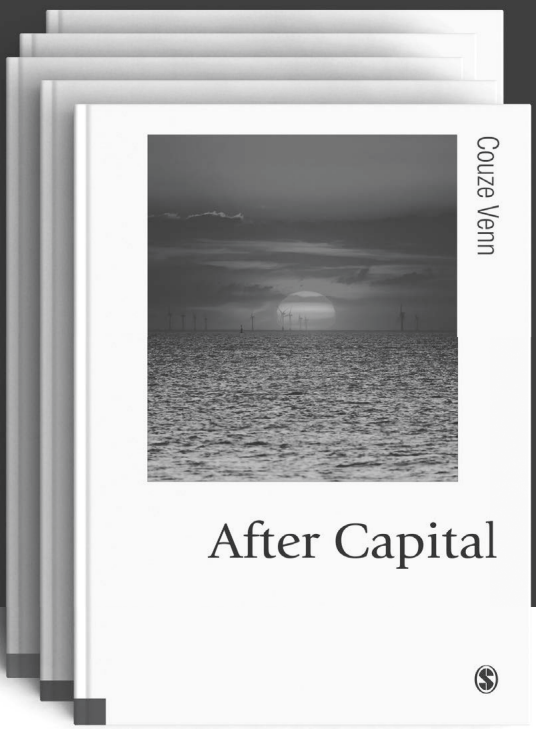

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