

# THE MINDFUL BODY AND GEOPOLITICAL EMBODIMENT DURING THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

MARINA HAKKARAINEN

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

In this article, I argue that the war between Russia and Ukraine has “geopolitical embodiment”, meaning personal bodily experiences that people associate with inter-state relations. In this case, the embodiment includes the “imprints” of feelings, moral sentiments, memories and relations connected with nation-states and their political relations. The “mindful body” theory (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) allows me to continue their metaphorical conceptualisation and talk about the “geopolitical body”. When approaching the topic, I explored the stories of four Russian citizens who experienced Russia’s invasion of Ukraine painfully. Ukraine was an integrated part of their personal, social and geopolitical space. They were strongly against the invasion and talked about changes in their lives and bodies that they attributed to the war: social fragmentation and physical sickness experienced as corporeal disintegration. To resist it and recollect their social and corporeal unity, they left Russia soon after the war began. Speaking about their experiences, they also represented their post-Soviet geopolitical subjectivities.

KEYWORDS: war, narratives, embodiment, disintegration, violence, resistance, mobility

## INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Russian state started the so-called special military operation (SVO – in Russian) – *spetsialnaya voennaya operatsiya* the term used by the Russian government against the state of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. After this, one could almost physically feel that life would never be the same in Russia. Laughing students, foreign tourists, people in military

1 The term “special military operation” is manipulative. It presents the war as a local military conflict. Simultaneously, Russian officials present it as a global confrontation between Russia and the collective West. Navaro-Yashin stresses that the production of confusion can be seen as a special tactic (2002, 175).

uniforms, all these people on the streets of Russian cities were no longer perceived neutrally. The public space changed overnight: it became framed by the context of war. “How can the students dare arrange their graduation party,” my colleague wondered. In her opinion, it is unethical to have parties while the war is going on. Foreign tourists also became a matter of discussions: “How could these Europeans come here considering the international air traffic blockade? Or maybe they are not tourists?” I was looking at the lonely figure of a middle-aged man in a military uniform as he waited for somebody at the door of a military office. “What does he feel being in the street among laughing young people who deliberately ignore him? Did he come from ‘there?’” In Saint Petersburg, which I had become familiar with in recent years, there are many military establishments – schools and working units. I had noticed earlier but was only now conscious of them. I see the war beamed down to the city from billboards with images of happy young soldiers in modern army equipment, advertising the military as “a real man’s job”. They invite men to join the *SVQji* (ours) and promise significant financial compensation. Everywhere, the war has tuned the vision of public life in today’s Russia. Even fine art exhibitions that, I suppose, were planned long ago, are seen as pro or contra the war.

At the very beginning of the war, many people in Russia were shocked regardless of their attitudes towards the war (Erpileva and Savelieva 2022, 54, 141, 200). Some opponents left the country immediately, driven by their “emotions” (Rapoport 2023), especially in the metropolitan area (Exodus-22 2023); others protested, with the most active brutally punished by the authorities. Later, strong emotions became more subdued, and the situation seemed to be normalised<sup>2</sup>. However, this process is better described as “privatisation” as opposed to normalisation – sensitive political topics confined to face-to-face encounters. Street conversations, neighbourhood talks and travel companions bring people back to the theme of war. People express their opinions in private discussions: they complain that they cannot understand who are “us” and who are “them”. Other people express anti-military sentiments, declaring themselves pacifists in a whispered voice – the excuse for their disagreement or not following the official agenda<sup>3</sup>. While some Russian inhabitants supported the war and even joined it, even those who did not condemn the invasion understood that something odd was happening.<sup>4</sup>

- 2 Navaro-Yashin writes about normalisation as a pushing to the back of public consciousness and forgetting (2002, 175). I would add here that the Russian state normalises this new war in everyday social and political order through the normalisation of bodies in everyday behaviour (cf. Asad 2003, 104).
- 3 My interviewee Alina (woman, 64, left Russia in 2023) believed that in saying “We are pacifists”, people are trying to avoid uncomfortable thoughts about the war. I myself noticed that the reference to pacifism often marked a war opponent’s unwillingness to discuss the conflict with strangers or war supporters. I also learned this trick helped to avoid unproductive discussions.
- 4 The video *The Publicity Booth* about life in Kostroma, a regional capital in central Russia, demonstrates how the town’s inhabitants show their attitude to the war by avoiding the topic, both euphemistically and directly (Otdel’naia Tsvil’zatsija 2022, Erpileva and Savelieva 2022).

I am writing this text a year and a half after the beginning of the war, and the topic has permeated the fabric of everyday life in Russia ever since. Terrifying war news enters people's homes daily. The Russian-speaking media discusses the battlefield in Ukraine, trials stamping out dissent, corruption scandals at the highest echelons of the military and so on. The degree of tension is high. Within this highly uncertain militarised context, there are also voices which strongly oppose the war.

War is a social institution "made on bodies" (Baker 2020, 1). It is an institutionalised and structured violence against human bodies that injures, disintegrates, kills and collects them for burying, mostly in performative ways. Besides the immediate visible damage, it also causes postponed pain and suffering to those that survive and that may stay hidden without the help of special research (e.g., Clarkin 2019). Displacement and disorientation are two of the most significant after-effects of military conflict on the bodies of people (e.g., Dunn 2017). The current war between Russia and Ukraine has both these aspects – visible and hidden. The media show the setting for consuming human bodies in Ukrainian territories in a brutal and performative way via attacks on both military and civilian objects. The invisible embodied experiences of aggression in this war are awaiting more systematic reporting, although researchers have already begun to focus on this (Pietrzak 2022, Tsymbalyuk 2023, Burluyuk and Misliu 2023, Hendl et al. 2023). At the same time, we do not pay much attention to the bodies of people who are physically on the territory of the aggressor, that is to say, distantly or passively involved in the military actions. They participate in the war discourses and everyday practices of the aggressor state via its legislation, news and conversations, processing all of these with their bodies.

I initiated this project because of my own traumatic perception of the war against Ukraine. My research question arose from my reflections on Russia's geopolitical ambitions. The Russian state regularly waged local wars, especially in post-Soviet territory. I had the impression that people in Russia experienced them rather distantly. The war against Ukraine in 2022, on the contrary, appeared to be extremely close. People around me experienced it emotionally and painfully. Why was this war particular for the people of Russia? What meanings did it convey for them? How did they experience this war *through*, *between* and in *between* their bodies (cf. Dyvik and Greenwood 2018; Baker 2020, 5; Narozhna 2021)?

To approach this topic, I collected the personal stories of nine people with a strong anti-war position, two men and seven women of different generations and social positions. I asked them about their relation to Ukraine and what they did, thought and felt before, during and after Russia's full-scale invasion of the country. I also asked them about their bodily experiences when the war started. Further questions of mine did not follow any strict inquiry. They depended upon the personal circumstances of the interviewees. Recorded between spring 2022 and autumn 2023, four of the interviews took place in Russia, four abroad and one online. All

my interviewees lived in Moscow or Saint Petersburg before the war. Therefore, they can be considered privileged citizens with regard to their metropolitan economic, cultural and social resources and university education. Some had dual citizenship beyond their Russian nationality, whereas others had long-stay visas in the Schengen Area that allowed them to travel between Russia and other countries. All of them also had strong and weak ties beyond Russia, including relatives, friends and colleagues.

To answer my questions, firstly, I focus on the embodiment of geopolitics and the geopolitical body. I then introduce four narratives of one man and three women – Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina.<sup>5</sup> Kirill’s story was about public protests. Julia based her narrative on her Russo-Ukrainian family identity. In turn, Inna and Katerina somehow shared similar circumstances of international mobility, living partly in Russia and partly abroad. Mobility emerged as a crucial aspect of the corporeal experience of the war for all my interlocutors. Consequently, the fourth part of this study focuses on the mobility that provided a sense of relief and an opportunity to renegotiate the geopolitical bodies of my interlocutors. In the last section, I will present general conclusions.

#### EMBODIMENT OF GEOPOLITICS AND THE GEOPOLITICAL BODY

I often hear people justify the current war between Russia and Ukraine by presenting the Russian state’s geopolitical needs as an objective necessity: “NATO approached Russia’s borders too closely” or “Russia needed the Sevastopol naval base for its security” (cf. Hendl et al. 2023, 181, 186). In this way, they take the aggressor’s side of violence and political domination instead of the rules of formal equality between sovereign states (cf. Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 5). In this article, I argue that the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine does not exist as geopolitical objectivity; instead, I want to highlight that this war has geopolitical embodiment in people who associate themselves with Russia (both as citizens or as permanent inhabitants). Therefore, I follow a feminist argument that disembodied geopolitical discussions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine are far from the embodied experiences of those who suffer. Limited by abstract political theory, they create a gap in knowledge production about the war (cf. Burlyuk and Misliu 2023; Hendl et al. 2023; Tsymbalyuk 2023).

Geopolitics as knowledge has its roots in geography that started as “*an active writing of the earth by an expanding, centralizing imperial state*” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 1; italics in original). The institutionalisation of geography provided an “unprecedented

5 I want to thank all my interlocutors from the bottom of my heart for their contribution to this uneasy topic. To protect their identities here and elsewhere, I have given them pseudonyms and withheld details that might reveal their identity.

program of imperial expansionism and territorial acquisition” through science, education and propaganda and constituted a “geopolitical tradition” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 16). Geopolitics produces governmental practices of territorialisation and “technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 5; see also Foucault 2012). Today, discussions on geopolitics, both professional and popular, are about international relations, danger and security; the territorial interests of states; military invasions and warfare and, in a broader sense, geo-power and world order (Ó Tuathail 1996; Dittmer and Sharp 2014). Critical geopolitics considers that they often represent the interests of ruling elites (Sharp 1993, 492-493; Tsygankov 2003, 102-103). Geopolitical knowledge produces geopolitical discourses, meanings and identities that are politically engaged but detached from people’s lived reality and disembodied (Hendl et al. 2023, 186).

As posited by Gerard Toal (2017, 13), geopolitics may be defined as a culture that is “experienced, understood and practiced”. It concerns the delineation of territorial entities, the demarcation of boundaries of identities, the differentiation of and positioning within the broad civilisational realm, and the categorisation of states as either allies or adversaries. In Toal’s words “state elites debate geopolitical visions and orientations within an international arena characterized by competing as well as shared myths, norms, and discourse”; geopolitical myths, in turn, create “coherence, structure, and identity for a community” and “help establish boundaries within and between communities;” within communities they are shared via “power networks” (2017, 41). Geopolitical myths and narratives can also be experienced both affectively and as a “slow phenomenon”, “for example, nostalgia for a lost order such as the Soviet Union. It can involve embodied experiences of vulnerability, passivity, suffering, fatigue” (Toal 2017, 45; see also Oushakine 2009). Following Toal’s and other embodiment studies in geopolitics and anthropology (e.g. Haldrup et al. 2008 or Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), I suggest that geopolitics as a culture also has an everyday bodily dimension.

In anthropology, the assumption that the physical body is always informed with and informed about its cultural status was proposed by Mauss (1973). This idea of cultural, social and political awareness of the body was developed further (Douglas 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Scheper-Hughes and Lock wrote about the “mindful body” and argued that “humans find the body ‘good to think with,’” and it “may be used as a cognitive map to represent natural, supernatural, social, and even spatial relations” (1987, 18-19). Geopolitics, therefore, also has its embodiment in individual bodies. In my view, “geopolitical embodiment” refers to the personal bodily experiences, perceptions, representations, awareness and expressions associated to inter-state relations. In this context, embodiment encompasses “imprints” of memories, discourses and multiple social relations, as well as feelings

and sentiments towards nation-states and their political relations. These intersect with class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship. The embodiment of sentiments, discourses and relations regarding international relations shape individuals' "geopolitical bodies".

What does Russian geopolitical culture look like though? What visions, orientations, myths, norms, narratives and discourses does it reproduce? Three narratives – about the territory, the population and the mission of the Russian state – attract attention (cf. Guseinov 2005, 56). The first, territorial narrative emphasises Russia's uniqueness "as a country of great width in terms of its Eurasian landmass" (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 4; cf. Tsygankov 2003, 106). It represents Russia's greatness as a natural result of geographical and historical processes and denies its colonial and imperial character. The huge territory poses a security dilemma due to its long border (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 4), and guarding it is a special topic within the narrative about the territory. Popular culture conveys this to the general public, in the form of children's books on border security for example (see Detskii sait n.d.). Consequently, the integrity of Russia and the openness of its borders are two major topics in current geopolitical discussions (cf. Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 668). In turn, the disintegration of the country or separation of its parts is seen as unnatural, catastrophic and a result of plotting enemies (Guseinov 2005, 56). With regards to the second narrative about the population, the problem of ethnicity has been in focus since the Soviet nation-building campaigns (see Slezkine 1994). The ideas and slogans about the unity of the Soviet people ("the USSR is a family of nations"; "Belarus, Russia and Ukraine are three brotherly nations" – Miller 2003; Slezkine 1994) co-existed with the topic of Russian diversity. The people's rights to sovereignty is an extremely sensitive topic in political discourses to this day. Combined with recent topics about labour immigration, they feed geopolitical argumentation depending on the discussion. The third, missionary narrative, roughly divides discussants into "Westerners" and supporters of the "Russian idea" (Levkievskaya 2005, 180). While "Westerners" emphasise Russia's similarities with Western countries and promote European values (Tsygankov 2003, 107; Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 668), the official propaganda uses a "civilisationist" rhetoric that outlines Russia's exclusive role in the decolonisation of colonised nations and in rescuing and protecting them from Nazism or fascism. This gives Russia the leading role in the civilisational struggle for "traditional values" against "Western values" (Edenborg 2017, 76, 89; cf. Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 669-670; Toal 2017, 43). It is important to consider that the Russian state here finds its mandate to wage war in carrying out this mission (Guseinov 2005, 61). These three grand narratives are represented by smaller discussions. They are disseminated by the media, public persons and social networks and, further, among other people to the "unconscious

domain of the political” (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 5). All three themes are in use in propaganda and popular discussions about the current war between Russia and Ukraine. They also shape the geopolitical bodies of my interlocutors – people sharing this Russian cultural background.

#### FOUR VIOLATED BODIES WITHIN A GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT

### **The Protesting Body and Spaces of Resistance**

My first interviewee was Kirill whom I met outside Russia three months after the war began. He was a man of about 30 who came from a metropolitan area. Before 24 February 2022, he had a plan to defend his PhD dissertation. The wave of recent events had not broken his long-term plans. Nonetheless, in light of the developments, he and his girlfriend had had to review their short-term arrangements. They soon decided to leave Russia. Although Kirill was officially declared unfit for military service, he moved abroad together with other men – relatives and friends – due to the panic and rumours concerning mobilisation. After some drifting about, he settled in a post-Soviet country. Kirill’s girlfriend joined him later.

The events of February 2022 were a milestone for Kirill. The young man was sure he did not have much time to think about the political situation and hardly remembered what was happening to him before this date. Yet, he closely followed the news on 22 February 2022 when Russia recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. He was waiting for the subsequent declaration of war, but it did not come, and he relaxed: “Like a weight had been lifted off my chest.” He believed in a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the conflict. However, soon a proper war began without a declaration. Thus, Kirill’s proper story about his war experience began with his reaction that it was necessary “to do something – to protest against it”. Through social networks chat forums, he learned that his friends had organised a group and were actively discussing their actions moving forward; he joined them to coordinate the protests.

Kirill and his girlfriend were strongly against the war and, at the very beginning, participated in the protests against it. Kirill’s story anticipated the relations between active citizens and the state that developed later. The situation was changing rapidly in the first days of the conflict. Discussions then took place between relatives and close friends. The first meeting was peaceful and well-coordinated – he and his friends were in control of the situation. It resembled a festival: people gathered and walked around, Kirill and his friends met their parents, younger and older generations demonstrated in solidarity. As well as going to meetings, young people made leaflets and distributed them around the city centre. Soon after, unfamiliar people joined the group, and their activity seemed suspicious and intimidating to Kirill. The protests began to feel less organised and safe. Later, police got involved.

Although the police remained neutral, the protesters anticipated their intervention. Kirill and his friends tried to stay away from the crowd, pretending to be just passersby. At the next protest, people started running away from the police. Kirill did not understand why people were running, expecting violence, if the police did not act. Nevertheless, he and his girlfriend ran together with them. Things soon got out of hand, and the situation became uncertain, with violent arrests beginning. Kirill's perception of the protests was mixed. He saw the strength of the protesting crowd and felt that the police were not as strong. At the same time, the vulnerability of individual people holding placards was obvious. They were the targets of police violence because they were individually visible. He saw violent arrests by the riot police's Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON). OMON was specially equipped with "hard helmets and tasers" (cf. Cattin 2022). It was frightening in a hard, rigid and cold monumental equipment. Kirill was afraid of violence against him and those close to him – both physical and mental.

Kirill's story paints a picture of the protests against the war among big city inhabitants like him. Though he did not have any particular ties to Ukraine, no relatives or friends there, he experienced this war as evil because, for him, "it happened so close". In Saint Petersburg, where Kirill and his girlfriend lived, protest activities were familiar and exciting for younger and middle-aged generations (cf. Gromov 2014, 46). Public corporeal representations and performative protests were almost the only way people could communicate the political in Russia (Yatsyk 2018; Fenghi 2020). The citizens probably believed that through protest they could be in dialogue with the authorities and influence the state politics. Contrarywise, Alexandre, a 24-year-old male interviewee from Moscow who had previously been politically active, confessed that by the beginning of this war, he had stopped believing in public protest. Although, like Kirill, he was considered unfit for military service, he did not trust the officials and felt extremely insecure, deciding to flee Russia as soon as it was possible for him.

### **Experiencing Ukrainianness in Moscow: a Very Personal Story**

In comparison to the performativity of public war protests introduced by Kirill, Julia's resistance story is highly private and personal. I interviewed Julia in Saint Petersburg in summer 2023. When the war began, she was 47 years old and held close emotional ties to Ukraine, having spent the first happy years of her life there. Julia's father was from Kyiv, her mother from Moscow. She was born there and came to Kyiv when she was just two weeks old. She spent her early childhood mainly in the Ukrainian capital, with summers spent at her grandmother's cottage near Moscow. At the age of 9, she returned to Moscow with her mother after her parents divorced. At 16 she decided to be a Ukrainian, registering this nationality on her first passport. Later, she



studied engineering and worked and lived in Moscow but regularly visited her father in Kyiv until his death. Thus, the beginning of the war triggered rather deep emotions in her. The current anxiety caused by news of the war was mixed with images from her happy childhood in Ukraine. Her early recollections were full of encounters with various people, relatives and strangers that resembled coloured pictures taken of Kyiv and her happy Ukrainian past.

Julia remembered that life in Kyiv was arranged around the Dnieper River. Mornings began with fishing and swimming very early, before people went to work. Many shops opened their doors at six in the morning, with a lot of people already in the streets. In Julia's recollections, Kyiv was also a developing city, with new residential districts. Families had several children: there were a huge amount of children in Kyiv. The considerable size of the child population was recounted by Julia: "We had classes until K<sup>6</sup> in our school, though there were three schools [in our district]. (...) Children studied in three shifts." Children were "independent and busy" in Julia's idealised Kyiv childhood. Parents and children composed a community of equality and security. Adults treated children with respect and understanding. Her teacher, as she remembered, always listened and spoke to pupils with respect, giving children the space to be themselves, something which did not take place in her Moscow school later.

In Julia's recollections, Kyiv was a completely secure city. People were all together, whether part of the intelligentsia – as her family was – or the working class. She remembered the café where she and her friend drank milkshakes. There they saw truck drivers having dinner: "It was only a positive atmosphere". Another of Julia's memories is of a sunny summer day:

A man in a t-shirt and with a bottle of kefir is sitting on the fence, a little bit plump. He's a worker, a man of working occupation in Kyiv. He does not smell of vodka, of nothing... [being a child] you can ask him about directions rather than be afraid of him.

At some point during our conversation, Julia engaged in a virtual dialogue with the Russian authorities challenging their allegation that Ukraine is a fascist state (e.g., ISD 2022). She told me about her rural eastern Ukrainian relatives, whom she and her father used to visit. Hard-working farmers, they were early to wake up, living a measured life. Their main concern was food production. The most amazing moment of this visit for her was that she, her father and the villagers all looked the same

6 In the Soviet school, classes were enumerated with letters. K is the tenth letter of the Russian alphabet (without considering the letters Jo and short I).

– their noses and eyes were “of different ages and sexes but similar”. While there, she met people from older generations who wore tattooed numbers on their hands from the concentration camps of the Second World War. Many of them received compensation from Germany as *Ostarbeiters*. Thus, her silent question was, “How could *they* be the fascists?” “So, this is this Ukraine, the eastern part, the life like that,” she said. As if answering the Russian state propaganda, she concluded as follows:

I just know how life is arranged there. How many aggressive people are there? Zero! In these areas. The east of Ukraine until Kyiv and including Kyiv and Kharkiv. They are busy people. They are occupied with their households and families. They just eat their dinner and repair the fence. That is what they are doing. They go somewhere to earn money, somebody studies. [...] And you see, their land... they would not leave it.

Julia stressed that when the war began her first hours were awful: reality and unreality were intertwined in her mind. She felt that she had died, imagining “Putin’s soldiers marching in Kyiv”. She saw everything but could do nothing, as if somebody had injected her with an anaesthetic. That is why she mostly lay at home and woke up only to eat a little piece of food, to avoid losing consciousness. She remembered having a clear image of a tank “shooting and shooting and shooting” at her: “I was in pain, and I felt that a big part of me had been blown off [...] as if there was a huge hole.” At the same time, her secure space abruptly diminished. The moment she went outside, she saw policemen “looking into the eyes of every citizen” – there were, unusually, several of them together, especially in the metro. She became afraid that her pain and hidden resistance would be revealed. She felt that the terror took its place within her, and it made her visible.

Julia admitted that she could not stay physically with this terror for too long. Immediately after the invasion, she decided to leave Russia for the first two weeks at least, in order to be “able to breathe, literally to breathe, to stay alive”. She left quickly, thanks to her Schengen visa and freelance status. In Europe, she recalled, almost everybody wanted to talk to her about the war. People discussed the geopolitical reasons, the consequences, the diplomatic solutions and other abstract political things that were far removed from Julia’s real life. They were not personally involved, as she saw, and they did not feel a similar pain to what Julia felt. It was almost impossible for her to discuss the war with them – people did not understand that it was a painful and very personal story. Thus, she found no relief in Europe and no solution as to how to continue there. In the end, she was a Russian citizen, her visa had expired, and she returned home.

Listening to Julia’s recollections, I thought that, like Kirill, Julia did not believe the war between Russia and Ukraine could take place. Her childhood world included

Kyiv and Moscow. Ukraine and Russia seemed solidly built into her recollections. It was a coherent secure space without contradictions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke into this space of hers, and she took it very painfully and very personally. The contradictions which she had not considered actualised after the war began: she found herself at a crossroads between her ethnicity, local identity and citizenship. The war required her to take an immediate decision about her political position, and she decided to become more mobile and prepare herself for future emigration from Russia.

### **Resisting Disintegration by Mobility**

The next two interviews with Inna and Katerina demonstrated that mobility was crucial to their war experiences. Our conversation with Inna, an executive manager in her 60s working on international research projects, happened in autumn 2023, 16 months after the Russian-Ukrainian war began. Although Inna's father was from Kyiv, and she had worked in the eastern part of Ukraine in the past, she did not feel any particular closeness to the country, as she told me. She had no sense of the war either physically or emotionally. For Inna, it happened "only on the map". Instead, she felt a deep empathy for her Ukrainian colleagues. She was in regular contact with them. When they told her about their conditions – the lack of food and heating and the bombing – she experienced the horror of her colleagues in her body: "It makes my skin crawl. It is as if the bombs also hit me."

At the very beginning, as she recounted, she did not believe that the war could happen. When the invasion began, she recalled experiencing enormous stress and confusion – almost a collapse. It was a shock, as if somebody had hit her head. She felt that her body was separated from herself and moved beyond her control, like it became – she tried to find the right analogy – an "astral body". At the same time, it was also a problem for her to find a proper place for her physical body ("Where it was, could be [now], or must be [in the future]."). It was just unclear how to locate herself in the new currently configured space to "put herself together": it seemed to her that after the war began, she "crumbled into pieces".

For Inna, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "a cataclysm of enormous proportions". She revealed that she withdrew from her usual life, experienced social uncertainty that was too difficult to deal with and began to fall ill regularly. Inna considered the loss of her sexual energy and desire to be the most crucial damage the war had done to her life. She clarified that her sexual desire was a proactive part of herself; it was her life energy, and it diminished drastically – "everything turned to zero". The absence of her sexual energy informed her of her loss of vitality. At the same time, she was not talking about pleasure here: Inna associated pleasure with going to the theatre or exhibitions, which she used to love, and regarded this as unethical during the war.

Inna explained that her condition correlated with what was happening in society around her – the latter was showing large-scale disintegration, especially in Europe. She

started to fear that Russia would close its borders, and that Europe would do the same. And, of course, some of her fears were realised – European countries severely restricted the mobility of Russian citizens and the movement of Russian goods and money on their territory. As a result, the society that Inna had experienced as united became divided by a “gulf”. People who did things together landed on different sides of that gulf – in Russia and beyond. Being on either the Russian side or the other side of the world side, people inevitably began to see the war in different ways. “It is like drifting plateaus that are slowly moving [away] from each other,” she commented. She resisted this by working much more than before and “jumping from one side [of the gulf] to the other and back” – her dual citizenship, allowed her to travel between Russia and European countries. She found it physically difficult to travel a lot, as she said, but not to travel was even harder for her: “I thought that I had to travel everywhere. I felt that society was disintegrating, and I needed to keep it with my body, moving it from one place to another.” This activity was rather irrational in her opinion because, in reality, she could not stop the process of separating Russia from Europe.

Katerina’s story was also about geopolitical and corporeal disintegration. Katerina was about 50 years old when I interviewed her at her home in Russia in the autumn of 2023. By this time, she had lived abroad for many years with long occasional stays in Russia. She was currently a housewife: she had not been able to find a permanent position as a political scientist in Europe, where she had been living. In February 2022, she came to Russia for a one-week visit alone, without her family. Almost immediately upon arriving, Russia recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. Katerina felt bad about the recognition of these states anticipating the worst – as she said, the situation was “so fucked up!”. However, within two days, the situation had worsened: Russia had launched its war against Ukraine.

Katerina remembered sitting in her apartment after the war began, looking at specks of dust in a ray of sunlight – like in the film *The Days of the Turbins* – and feeling that her world was ruined and her home was no longer safe. Everything disappeared in a moment. Wanting to be with others, she tried to meet people as much as possible; at home, where she was alone, she could not sleep or eat, just work while “gritting her teeth”. She was as in a state of delirium, or perhaps in a film where reality and her physical body were separated from each other. She felt unable to remain in this state for long and left Russia soon after. She recalled that when the bus crossed the Russian border, all the passengers breathed a sigh of relief. The bus appeared to her as Noah’s Ark, saving them from aggression.

According to her story, it was probably the first time Katerina recognised the wall between Russia and the rest of the world, the wall that later separated her colleagues and friends in Russia from her. At the same time, she was a Russian citizen in Europe. That is why her and her family’s transnational life and mobility demanded

special effort to keep it together. In the family, she was responsible for getting these social and geographical pieces together as a whole, and it was not easy in the new situation. It was a grim period for Katerina: she lost her joy of life. Anxiety was unable to leave her. After the war began, her physical condition was defined by news of the war – any missile attack against Ukraine disabled her completely. Katerina lost her wish to travel to Russia because she did not know what and who she might face there. She did not allow herself to enjoy the beauty of her beloved home city, music or cinema. She did not want to go to concerts, feeling alienated from “people” who could be happy in Russia now. She was constantly waiting for something bad. She was emotionally ruined and felt that her “mind could not digest” these global problems – the political changes were too global. Later, she believed she needed perhaps some medical help to get enough “air to breathe” into her head because her mind had become “one constantly tensed muscle”. The only thing she allowed herself to enjoy was nature: the smell and the rustling of leaves that she remembered from her childhood. It reconciled her with her necessary visits to Russia.

Explaining her relations to Ukraine, Katerina stressed that she did not have strong ties to the country. However, she knew many people from Ukraine, and she had many colleagues there. She had visited different places in Ukraine at different periods of her life. She felt that the country was an integrated part of her biography that is rooted in her Soviet past. She included it in her Soviet-embodied everyday life experience. Trying to explain her painful condition, Katerina spoke about the post-Soviet peoples’ collective body. From her childhood, she remembered that at primary school she was taught to experience the unity of the fifteen Soviet republics and “the friendship of their peoples” when children wore folk costumes and represented the Soviet republics through song and dance during public festivals. These were her lessons in embodying the Soviet geopolitical identities. In Katerina’s opinion, Ukraine was part of a collective body learnt from Soviet times “whether we want to accept this or not”. In her opinion, people who lived in the Soviet Union, including Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, had some kind of a common body. This consisted of common bodily communication and interaction, priceless experiences that cannot be explained in national or ethnic terms. Hence why she took seriously any war happening in the post-Soviet space. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was particularly painful in her opinion, and she tried to explain it: “It is like one hand has gone against another one.” In her opinion, this is the reason people took this war so emotionally in Russia. At the same time, she stressed that Ukraine is a sovereign state, politically independent from Russia, and admitted that no one can contest this.

## THE GEOPOLITICAL BODY RECOLLECTED. HEALING MOBILITY

Why did Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina experience the war that Russia began against Ukraine with sickness, feelings of corporeal disintegration and a loss of control over their physical abilities and desires? Why could they not continue their daily routine? For what reasons did all of them decide to leave Russia? “War is an event [...] that ruptures the network of material objects, social relations, and symbolic meanings that make the world appear as coherent, consistent, and meaningful” (Dunn 2017, 23). Indeed, the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which Russian authorities manipulatively called a “special military operation”<sup>7</sup>, affected a huge number of people in Ukraine as well as in Russia. Every day the media brought news that thousands of people had been killed and millions displaced. The war has ruined both material infrastructures and social relations. It has been a violation of people’s normal life, their worlds of consistent meanings and their subjectivities. Finding meaningfulness in life and a coherent existence demands a lot of effort, and the process is usually long and painful (cf. Oushakine 2009; Dunn 2017).

My interlocutors, Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina had different relationships with Ukraine. Kirill did not have any close personal relations. Inna had working ties to Ukraine. Julia’s experiences were deeply rooted in her Ukrainian past, whereas Katerina mostly associated herself with the Baltic states where she had strong ties but, she stressed, special relations with Ukraine. Nevertheless, they made it clear that they experienced a special embodied unity bonded by memory, family ties, friendship, work collaborations and an embodied geopolitical imagination. The war between Russia and Ukraine disrupted these ties and broke this embodied unity; it injured people’s spatial identities and imagined bodies. For my interviewees, the war was not only unethical but also “counterintuitive” – unnatural and meaningless: they could not believe it possible. For them it was a suicidal war against themselves: “one hand fighting against another” or “shooting at ourselves”. Integrity was important, but war conveyed to them a traumatic disintegration, as if they were irrevocably losing part of themselves.<sup>8</sup> The war was experienced as a final disintegration of the imagined post-Soviet unity they experienced corporeally.

7 The term “special military operation” presents the war as a local military conflict. Simultaneously, Russian officials present it as a global confrontation between Russia and the collective West. Navaro-Yashin stresses that the production of confusion can be seen as a special tactic (2002, 175).

8 Surveys conducted before the war, in 2021, showed that the idea of Russo-Ukrainian unity was popular both in Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, 52% of respondents regarded Ukrainians as a fraternal people. In Ukraine, the majority of respondents (55%) did not agree that Russians and Ukrainians are one people; however, 41% did. In the Ukrainian east, 60% agreed. In the Ukrainian west 70%, did not agree (Vedomosti 2021, Rating Group 2021). At the same time, the majority of both Russians and Ukrainians did not support the idea of unifying the two states. The situation today has changed significantly and demands further monitoring.

Listening to Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina's stories, I could follow how in their recent lives everything became political or, more precisely, geopolitical in the context of the war. Everyday practices of private life, leisure, travelling, professional activity, friendship, family relations, even clothes came to be seen through the lens of this geopolitical conflict – they became (geo)politicised in a newly established (geo) politicised space (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002). This expanding new geopolitical space contradicted my interviewees' (geo)political corporeality and spatiality, creating an uneasiness between their bodies and the social environment. I could almost literally see how their space of individual agency – cultural, social, political, professional and private – was transforming under the circumstances of the war. It is true that despite the rebellious political enthusiasm of the political opposition prior to 2012 (Gromov 2014), the space for public politics had nonetheless recently been shrinking in Russia because of growing repression (Yatsyk 2018, 128). The process was systematic but gradual. Step by step, people were normalising newly appeared marks of political pressure by pushing these to the back of their consciousness and forgetting (see Navaro-Yashin 2002, 175). However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the space for representing public political opposition diminished drastically. Almost immediately it became filled with the representatives of state power (police, OMON) exercising physical oppression and pushing political opponents from the public space. Rather quickly, war supporters, state propaganda and indifference filled the spatial void. My interviewees experienced this deprivation painfully and differently, representing different spatialities and corporealities at the intersection of their age, gender, ethnic and local identities, and citizenship. For Kirill, his experience of public action and protest transformed the collective body into leisure walkers, fragmented and vulnerable to physical repressions. In Julia's public everyday life, people's space of resistance barely extends beyond their bodies under the inspective eyes of police in the street.<sup>9</sup> Inna and Katerina expanded their space of resistance beyond Russia, and immediately they started to break in half. Yet, all of them admitted that 24 February 2024 changed their life completely.

Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina decided to establish themselves outside Russia. Post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan became important locations in their mobility, sense of security and for their embodied activities. The European countries retained their appeal as a destination. However, the European space, which before the war was relatively homelike and homogeneous because of their usual international mobility and ties with relatives, friends and colleagues, became fragmented into discrete nation-states after the war, each implementing distinct regulatory frameworks. These regimes reshaped their spaces

9 One described moment was police in the Moscow metro inspecting mobile phones, searching for protest content. It initiated additional fears and panic among those who were against the war.

according to their formal citizenship, regardless of their anti-war positions. Our subjects' familiar worlds disappeared, and the previous geopolitical unity disintegrated to be reconstructed onto a new base.

Almost all my interviewees, including those quoted here, as well as others, decided to leave Russia after the war began. Their reasons provided for this decision were diverse, and they followed different paths of mobility. Kirill attributed his decision to his emotional response to the war, while Julia was unable to stay home in her "anaesthetic state". Katerina felt that she had lost her home's connection with the body and reality. Inna was trying to keep the countries from moving apart with her dual presence. All of them considered the act of leaving Russia after the beginning of the war as important. Being mobile between Russia and other countries obtained life-saving significance for them.

Kirill in his story mentioned that leaving Russia was, to him, emotional, not reasonable. This opinion – that people decided to leave Russia after the war began without any apparent reason – is widely shared. However, I consider the decision to leave the country as having great symbolic significance for the participants (e.g., Baranova 2023, Rapoport 2023). Their exodus from Russia was a strong act of resistance and, at the same time, a healing practice that carried a symbolic restorative effect<sup>10</sup> on their violated identities and imagined broken bodies. Indeed, their migration was emotionally loaded and highly expressive. When Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina left Russia, their leaving may have been silent but it was also an extremely strong communicative action that informed society of their resistance to the aggressive geopolitics of the Russian state. At the same time, while on the move, they renegotiated their bodies within new geopolitical circumstances. By moving between countries, they were making new connections and repairing the ruptures in their bodies, society and space. Though some of them seemed to wander in a liminal space in between, moving back and forth, their mobility, the physical international movement, became a healing instrument that cured their broken and violated bodies and domesticated the hostile environment. Thus, mobility is of particular importance for them. In a way, they were like many other Russian inhabitants, thousands who decided to emigrate from Russia at this time (e.g., Exodus-22 2023, Baranova 2023, Zavadskaya 2023). As other people were displaced from their homes, they also had to rearrange their material environment – to look for new homes, new routes and new sources of income. They had to rearrange their social relations. However, the most important was, as Inna told me in our conversation, to return their lost desires and meaning in their lives.

<sup>10</sup> It might be compared to symbolic forms similar to "rituals of resistance", constituting group identity but not "politically effective forms of resistance" (Bell 2009, 71).



## CONCLUSION: VIOLATED BODIES AND EMBODIED VIOLENCE

On 24 February 2022, Russia started its full-scale aggression against Ukraine. More than just that, the full-scale war also invited Russian citizens to participate in this institutionalised violence on different levels, involving all categories of the population – men, women, even children (cf. Dubna ru 2023). In an instant, Russian society sank into the totality of militarisation, masculinisation and brutalisation. Individuals were ascribed and prescribed to share a collective body of the nation and a destiny as an aggressor state according to their citizenship. In these circumstances, people who could not accept the SVO, like my interlocutors, recognised the immediate restructuring of power relations in Russian society. They felt their vulnerability in the face of this state-approved aggressive violence towards people like them and reacted strongly to the aggression embodying this violence.

The human body is a spatial category. It creates space within social relations by practising and domesticating it (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 20). It is aware of its own local, national and international spatiality (e.g., Assmuth et al. 2018; 2024). My interviewees spoke about their physical experiences, contextualising them in particular geopolitical relations. They narrated the embodiment of their feelings, moral sentiments, memories, discourses and multiple social relations addressing nation-states and their political intercourse, placing emphasis on the embedded closeness of Russia and Ukraine. They included themselves in the post-Soviet geopolitical relations and constructed a post-Soviet spatial unity physically experienced. Europe was also included in their spatiality as a familiar and culturally close area. To some extent, they reproduced the Soviet geopolitical values that promoted the territorial and population unity of the Soviet Union. Perhaps they supported also the missionary importance of Russian culture – as do many Russian immigrants who live abroad (Hakkarainen 2024). While the Russian authorities exploited the narrative of Russo-Ukrainian unity to justify the war, for the participants in this study, the latter conveyed collapse and disintegration. Despite secure ties with Ukraine on a personal level, on a national level, these were deteriorating, and they felt it in their bodies. Perhaps it could be compared to the cultural trauma of the Soviet Union's disintegration (Tsygankov 2003, 103; Oushakine 2009; Fenghi 2020, 21)?

The Soviet Union left a huge colonial legacy to its former inhabitants (and the world) after its collapse. They inherited a large cultural heritage; geopolitical hierarchies (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 5); ethnic, religious and national violent conflicts; the consequences of technological disasters (Petryna 2002); new national states and hybrid subjectivities living on its borders (cf. Bhabha 1994). In the recent world of post-globalisation, national borders and separation trends after COVID (e.g., Assmuth et al. 2024: 14–16), the post-Soviet legacy does not match

well to the definitive boundaries. Hybrid post-imperial subjectivities that inscribed themselves in the wider world beyond their state earlier are left in a liminal state of “in-betweenness”. Thus, they are in search of new domestication and reconstruction of their corporeal identities.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Marina Hakkarainen  
Independent Researcher  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8138-5667  
Email: [marina.hakkarainen@gmail.com](mailto:marina.hakkarainen@gmail.com)

