

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imagining the future – rejecting the present: Future thought and defensive discourse strategies in Russian society during wartime

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Abstract

For many Russians, the Russia–Ukraine war became a starting point for rethinking their identity. And thinking about their personal and national future played a significant role in this process. This article is based on the analysis of the interviews I collected during the first year of the war. It examines how imagining the future activates a variety of defense mechanisms, which can be situated in four unique, yet not mutually exclusive, defensive discourse strategies. The primary focus is the connections among future thinking, agency, defensiveness, and identity. The whole spectrum of different and, in some cases, opposite visions of the future and the fact that the majority of respondents used more than one defensive discourse strategies can be a sign of a significant fragmentation – on individual and collective levels. This fragmentation is almost invisible if we consider the public opinion polling or Putin’s approval rating. This paper gives crucial insights into what remains hidden in the statistics and presents a more complex picture of Russian society in a time of war.

Keywords: collective memory; future thoughts; defensive strategies; identity; guilt; Russia

*To all your crazy world,
One answer - 'I refuse'*
Marina Tsvetaeva, 1939

In Russia, major new disputes over the potential future started in 2022, immediately after Russia attacked Ukraine. For many Russians, this war became a turning point in figuring out their identity – national identity in particular. It led Russians to ask themselves repeatedly questions such as, ‘Is this my nation?’ ‘Do I belong to it?’ ‘Am I responsible for its activity?’ ‘What does the future hold for us/me?’ Whereas the sociological polling and pro-government Russian media constantly show people’s rising optimism towards the national future,¹ the individual’s role in this bright country’s future, as well as the link

¹ According to sociological polls carried out in February 2024, Russians’ belief in their country’s bright future constantly increased during the two years of the war. In 2024, approximately 75% of respondents expressed the belief that during the upcoming 8–10 years, the country’s situation would improve, and 40% said they had no

between personal and national future thinking, remained almost non-reflected in this research². There is also a significant difference in the reflection of people's fears and anxiety. The pro-government media stressed the 'social fears' of Russians (such as fears of getting sick, losing a job, inability to pay bills, etc.) and the absence of any fears about the ongoing war³. The independent media and institutes who analyzed not only polls but also media headlines throughout the year reported an extremely high level of anxiety in Russia and its close connection to the Russia-Ukraine war⁴. 'Drones', 'diversions', and 'the course of SMO',⁵ were the top fears of people, especially in the big cities and the regions bordering Ukraine⁶. Another sign of increasing anxiety and stress in Russian society is the growth of antidepressant sales (their constant growth in sales was reported since the beginning of the war). According to *Holod Media* (an independent media resource), at the beginning of 2024, sales grew by 33% compared to the same period of 2023 and reached their record level in the last five years⁷. All these data show that Russian society is going through significant stress and trauma, but this painful process remained underexamined and almost uncovered on both media and academic levels.

Collective responsibility and collective guilt are rare feelings for Russians. To feel shame, responsibility, and guilt, people must have agency and be, at least in some measure, involved in the political life of their country/nation. But Russian history is a history of unfreedom, serfdom, repressions, and tyranny (Figs 1998; Figs 2022, Snyder 2018), and civil society has largely failed to form so far. Many people see little difference between their personal fate and the fate of the state (since the idea that their lives and bodies are the state's property persists as a relic of serfdom consciousness⁸). In that context, people did not face a choice about whether to sacrifice their lives to the state or not, to support its policy or not, given that they would be hunted down and face dire consequences. The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed the situation drastically because in previous wars unleashed by Russia, there was no mobilization, and the people whom Russian soldiers fought against were different from Russians ethnically and/or religiously (Afghans, Chechens, Georgians, etc.). Crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine – against the 'brotherly' nation living on the closest territory, having close historical roots, sharing the same 'origin story', and belonging to the same ethnos and religion,

doubt that their country would be a "strong and flourishing state." <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/obraz-budushchego-ocenki-rossijan>

² At the end of 2023, the Levada Center reported that "compared to 2022, 2020, and 2014, when the difference in assessments of the situation in the country and the private sphere could exceed 20 percentage points, then in the past year it was halved." However, it was unclear what this statement meant and what stayed behind this data: did Russians feel their personal future depended more on the national one? Or did they feel more responsible for both their national and personal future? Was it a sign of their over-identification with the state and the nation? All these questions remained without answers if checking the sociological data and media reports. (<https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/503133-uskorennaa-adaptacia-kak-rossiane-ocenivaut-2023-god-i-cego-zdud-ot-2024-go>)

³ <https://www.rbc.ru/society/20/12/2022/63a052869a79472d25739b22>

⁴ For example: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/01/03/trevozhnost-kak-natsionalnaia-idea>

⁵ "Special Military Operation" (SMO) is a term used in Russia to describe the Russian activity in Ukraine; the word "war" in the Ukrainian context is officially banned by Russian law.

⁶ The CROS company provides the most recent data on anxiety in Russia. The CROS team regularly updates and releases the National Index of Anxieties, identifying and ranking the phobias and fears of Russians based on the analysis of traditional and social media. This is the 2023-year report on anxiety in the regions of the Russian Federation: <https://www.cros.ru/ru/exploration/anxiety/4094/>

⁷ https://www.instagram.com/p/C5A8CioL6kB/?igsh=MTI30WWhhMGhLaHdwcA%3D%3D&img_index=1

⁸ In Russia, serfdom had been a dominant form of relationship between the peasants (the majority of the Russian population), the nobles, and the state until the mid-19th century. Even after its abolishment in 1861, it kept existing in different forms of paternalistic schemata that still underlie the relationship between people and authorities/the state in most spheres of life.

Christianity – made almost everyone think about the future and question their own place in it.

In this paper, I will examine how imagining the future activated a variety of defense mechanisms which can be situated in four unique, yet not mutually exclusive, discourse strategies: passive hostage syndrome with no future thinking, active hostage syndrome coupled with positive future thinking, denial of identity coupled with negative future thinking, and fragmentation of identity coupled with fragmented future thinking. My primary focus will be connections between future thought, agency, defensiveness, guilt/shame feeling, and identity. The whole spectrum of different and, in some cases, opposite visions of the future that will be shown in this paper and the fact that the majority of respondents used more than one defensive discourse strategies can be a sign of a significant fragmentation – on individual and collective levels. This fragmentation is almost invisible if we consider the official statistics or Putin's approval rating. However, this painful and complicated search for identity is an important aspect of the Russian reality because it splits the nation deeply inside.

Clarifying and coming to terms with one's identity in Russia today is made more painful and even dramatic due to identification with a very powerful group (the 'Great Russian State') that can play a crucial role. For this group 'State pride cannot be dissociated from a hardly repressible shame ('... a great nation, rich country but people live in poverty and disorder') and a frustrating feeling of backwardness compared to developed countries' (Gudkov 2023). The realization of the potential damage that this 'super-powerful group' will cause and probably be judged for has pushed people to rethink the nature of their group (is it rather bad or good?) and their identification with it - and this, at the moment has resulted in various forms of defensiveness.

This paper uses interviews I collected during the first year of the war. It shows a fragmented picture of the national futures imagined by Russians and the spectrum of defensive discourse strategies they use for dealing with them. By defensive discourse strategies, I have in mind a tool kit of 'psychological tools' people use in their discourse to defend themselves against sensitive and/or harmful feelings (such as responsibility, shame, guilt, etc.). These bear some similarities to strategies that some societies use when overcoming traumas (Assmann 2016; Giesen and Schneider 2004). Although some features of what was described as 'offset' and 'externalization' in previous research can be found in the defensive strategies outlined in this paper, implementing previous conceptions into Russia's case would hardly be possible. These authors' strategies were based on examples of relatively small mono-national countries defeated in wars. Moreover, they were explored 'after a closure' of the dramatic story: after the end of WWII, when the crimes committed by Hitler's coalition were revealed, and most of the perpetrators were sentenced. Also, most previous research focused on how nations dealt with their traumatic past and how it affected their present; the role of future thought in this process was often under-discovered.

Russia differs in some important respects from these cases. It has huge territories, and each of its parts differs from others in terms of historical development and population (traditions, religions, culture, level of education and urbanization, etc.). These differences, as well associated unequal levels of direct involvement of people in military actions (most people who were drafted and volunteered to the Russian army are from national republics, small cities, and rural areas), can lead to different views and perception of both present and the future. Thus, a single strategy can hardly be applied to such a heterogeneous and fragmented society.

Also of major importance is the fact that the end of the story is unknown at this point; nobody can predict where all this will bring Russia and its people. And if people are not sure about further developments in the war, it is hard to apply existing schemas that

describe a society in the midst of its way to an unknown end. But what seems evident is that people are on their way to a new understanding of their identity - for some people, through guilt and shame; for some people - through pride and honour; for others - through grief and depression or grievance⁹.

Future thinking

Thinking about the future is an integral component of human cognition: we imagine the future every day, planning our lives, making decisions, or just dreaming. Endel Tulving referred to 'mental time travel' - the human capacity to remember or relive experiences in the past and imagine or pre-live events that might happen in the future (Tulving 1985). Individual mental time travel (MTT) has been studied by figures such as Schacter *et al.* (2017) and Szpunar (2010). These studies revealed that the cognitive processes involved in remembering the past and imagining the future are closely related, and memory is one of the resources that support insight into the future (Addis *et al.* 2007; Atance and O'Neil 2001; Okuda *et al.* 2003; Wheeler *et al.* 1997). Further studies showed that future imagination is not just an individual phenomenon but can take collective form (Merck *et al.* 2016; Szpunar and Szpunar 2016).

Collective future thought and collective mental time travel have only recently been addressed in memory studies, but it has become a topic of great interest (Manning *et al.* 2013; Merck *et al.* 2016; Race *et al.* 2013; Szpunar and dSzpunar 2016; Topcu and Hirst, 2020, 2022; Wang *et al.* 2016). Szpunar & Szpunar have defined collective future thought as 'an act of imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group' (Szpunar and Szpunar 2016, p. 378). They also argue that, like collective memory, collective future thought is a property of a group to which individual individuals belong. In studies of mental time travel, research suggests that when people reflect on their personal past and look ahead to their personal future, they tend to focus on positive events. And when asked about the past of a collective such as a nation, people also tend to view things positively. But when people are asked to imagine the future of their nation, they often have a more negative view (Liu and Szpunar 2023; Yamashiro and Pashkov 2023).

Strong group identity makes people emotionally react when considering events of their group history, making emotion also a group-level phenomenon (Alexander *et al.* 1999; Smith 1993). People with high group identification often have 'a greater sense of 'common fate,' and therefore express 'more guilt about their country's past shameful actions' (Doosje *et al.* 2006) and also feel more anxiety about their group's future threats (Wohl *et al.* 2012). Events that impact the group can trigger emotional reactions, even if an individual is not directly impacted (Caouette *et al.* 2012). These emotional reactions can be either positive (pride, happiness, etc.), negative (guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety, etc.), or in some rare cases, both.

Other research on future thinking has shown that the imagination of a country's future is not stable and can change following social, political, and cultural transformations (Greenfield 2018; Varnum and Grossmann 2017; Wang 2018). (Mert *et al.* 2022) have examined the significant role of country identification and national well-being in the collective future thinking of Chinese, Turkish, and American adults. Among their most important findings is that even though 'stronger country identification may be associated with

⁹ Sociologist Alexey Levinson presented another data that demonstrates the complex and controversial picture of Russian society during his interview for *Forbes. Russia*. Based on thousands of personal interviews with the residents of different regions of Russia, he spoke about a society that "feels bad but does not realize it." He also described the complex and, in many cases, controversial feelings that coexist in people's minds and how they affect their personal and political activities. <https://youtu.be/diTNTZnEUas?si=Y4gAikAMkjjjQjH4>

greater perceived national future well-being' and can push people to imagine more positive outlooks for a country's future, it does not work for some societies. In some cases (e.g., Turkey), a strong country identification did not lead to an optimistic image of a collective future. The authors explained it by the 'discrepancy between their [Turks'] expectations and experiences (e.g., economic crisis, lack of freedom of speech, social unrest, etc.)' (Mert *et al.* 2022, p. 787). Motivational factors can also play a significant role in both personal and collective future thought (Walker and Skowronski 2009): persons who do not have a sense of agency in future events have less motivation and tend to think pessimistically about their and their country's future.

The agency factor, as we will see, played a significant role in constructing both the personal and country's imaginary future by the Russian respondents. Other factors, such as an individual's current mental state, well-being (Macleod and Conway 2005, 2007), 'internalized cultural beliefs' (Shao *et al.* 2010), relationship with the country, and 'perceived current state of the country' (Mert *et al.* 2022) can also influence individuals' thinking about the future. It is worth noting that when they were interviewed, many of my respondents were struggling with personal crises (identity, economic, mental, or family crisis); five of them admitted they suffered from depression and other mental disorders, had been in therapy, and were taking antidepressants. These might affect their perception of the present and the future.

Future thought, guilt, and defensive mechanisms

The phenomenon of collective guilt, an emotional reaction caused by the distress that group members experience when they accept that their ingroup is responsible for immoral actions that harm another group, has been explored by Branscombe *et al.* (2002). However, almost all studies of collective guilt have explored a group's feelings in terms of the harm and crimes it has perpetrated in the past. Collective guilt for future harm has recently been examined primarily in sociology and social anthropological studies. These studies revealed that the temporal frame of a transgression influences people's moral judgments (Caruso 2010; Eyal *et al.* 2008; Peetz *et al.* 2010); moreover, people tend to feel more responsibility for possible future transgressions by their group than for those committed in the past (Caouette *et al.* 2012; Caruso 2010). One reason for this appears to be the illusion of control over the future in contrast to the past: we think we can affect and change the future, but we cannot change the past.

Accepting guilt and responsibility is usually a long-term and painful process - both for individuals and groups. People generally try to avoid unpleasant feelings, especially intense ones that could lead to a disturbance or even destruction of identity. Thus, the defense against guilt is a 'natural strategy for saving face; everything uncomfortable with one's identity or profile is warded off' (Assmann 2016, p. 63).

Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider, explored the 'perpetrators' trauma' of Germans, suggested four stages for society to overcome it: 'displacement' (Verdrängen), 'offsetting' (Abspalten), 'expression' (Ausprechen), and 'working through' (Durcharbeiten) (Giesen and Schneider 2004, p. 12). Aleida Assmann developed these notions, presenting strategies for repressing memory that hinder overcoming trauma. These strategies include offsetting, externalization, erasure, remaining silent, and outright falsification (Assmann 2016, p. 141-154). However, neither Bernhard Giesen, Christoph Schneider, nor Aleida Assman focused on exploring future thought as part of the 'working-through-the-trauma' process: their primary interest was how societies dealt with their past and how it affected their present, whereas the role of future thinking—as the driving force of recognizing guilt/shame and trauma—remained almost noncovered.

Adorno argued that the rejection of collective guilt stems from an individual's urge not to be drawn into the collective, 'to save one's neck from the collective noose' as a means to avoid having to take responsibility (Adorno 2010, p. 82). The notion of 'defense' stems from Freud's writings such as 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defense.' He used the term 'to describe the ego's struggles against painful or unendurable ideas and effects' (Freud 1993, p.42).

As mentioned in the introduction, examining Russia is in the midst of war, and this can make it difficult to harness findings about the experience of past events and in the associated search for identity. Some people still do not realize that their country and they themselves are experiencing trauma. Others are figuring out their identity and prospective place in a new world and may have reached the 'working through' (Durcharbeiten) stage and even guilt.

But, interestingly, in most cases, thinking of the future and speaking about it pushed the respondents to defend their own separate identity, group identity, or fragmented image of self- and group. In what follows, I outline four discourse strategies to explore how imagining the future activates different defensive mechanisms in Russian society. The strategies are: 1. passive hostage syndrome with no future thinking, 2. active hostage syndrome coupled with positive future thinking, 3. denial of identity coupled with negative future thinking, and 4. fragmented identity coupled with fragmented future thinking. These do not require categorizing individuals as being solely in one or another category. Some might fall into one category in general, but many used more than one category. Finally, I will also try to trace how these discourse strategies link to collective guilt.

Methods

The main evidence I examine comes from a qualitative analysis of 32 unstructured interviews that I collected in June-December 2022. All interviews were audio-recorded. Some were conducted in person in Russia (July 2022), Armenia (November 2022), and Cyprus, where I lived from February 2022 until May 2023; others were conducted online (via social media, Skype/Zoom, or phone calls). Twenty-five of the interviews were with people living in Russia, and seven were with Russians living outside the country. In some cases, the names of the participants have been changed at the request of the respondents for security reasons. The age range of participants was 19-68 years old; 19 women and 13 men. All the respondents were originally from big cities in Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, Kazan, Novosibirsk, and Sevastopol. The population of big Russian cities differs from that of small cities and villages; it is younger, more educated, better travelled, more tolerant¹⁰, and experienced in using several sources of information. Rural areas are mostly inhabited by people of older generations, more conservative, more loyal to Putin¹¹, and who are used to getting information from TV mostly¹².

Interviewing people in wartime and are living under a repressive political regime is highly challenging, making the sample limited and one that grew out of my personal

¹⁰ One of the most significant indicators of tolerance in Russian society is the attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community. Pre-war polling had constantly shown the correlation between the level of tolerance and the socio-demographical factors: residents of big cities were usually more tolerant than those of rural areas and small towns, youth were more tolerant than older generations, and female respondents were more tolerant than males. More about LGBTQ+ tolerance in Russia: Kon, I. (2010). *Klubnichka an Berezke. Seksualnaya Kultura v Rossii*. Moskva: Vremya.

¹¹ Some insights on what motivated residents of Russian villages and small towns to vote for Vladimir Putin: https://youtu.be/37YTRWThCK8?si=8XeUPfXBP3JE-fk_

¹² The recent data about the sources of information and their popularity among different age groups and regions of the Russian Federation: <https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/03/osnovnye-istochniki-informatsii-rossiyan/>

contacts in Russia. People feared being reported on and were concerned that they would get into trouble. In that setting, people obviously tend not to trust each other and avoid sharing feelings, especially with strangers. Thus, I used my personal contacts and social media to find those willing to be interviewed. The names of the respondents have been changed for security reasons.

I chose the unstructured form of interview in an attempt to avoid guiding or restricting the participants about the particular subject of my interest and to follow their own narratives. I tried to avoid introducing the topics of national identity, shame, or guilt and only pursued these issues when participants themselves volunteered or implicitly referenced them. I asked people to describe their lives since the beginning of the war and the feelings and emotions involved; further questions followed up on participants' previous responses.

My main interest is in how 'future thinking' appeared as a concern in the interviews. In most cases, future thinking emerged spontaneously and without any pressure from me. Almost all participants were very anxious about the future of their motherland. However, future thinking and the emotional reactions associated with it took several different forms, such as rejecting any thinking about the future, avoiding talk about it, and avoiding feelings of guilt and responsibility.

When collecting the interviews and analyzing them, I tried to avoid moral judgments of the interviewees. These interviews included elements that can be grouped into four categories. Again, this is a categorization of forms of discourse, not of individuals.

Passive hostage syndrome with no future thinking

The term 'hostage' is used because Russian interviewees frequently pointed to the notion in their narratives when describing themselves in the current situation in Russia. This does not necessarily correlate with all elements of the Stockholm syndrome, in which hostages develop positive feelings toward the captors or abusers. In many cases, my respondents considered themselves 'hostages' in the sense that they recognize the hopelessness of their situation. Positive feelings towards the President or regime could or could not be attached.

Since February 24, 2022, the idea of the Russian people being captured by Putin's regime has been brought up many times in liberal circles in Russia as well as in the Western media.¹³ It signals an intention to justify the actions of ordinary people and externalize and displace guilt to decision-makers. A similar phenomenon emerged in Germany after WWII when Germans experienced a period of externalization of guilt and saw themselves as Hitler's victims. In that case, they put the blame on the 'real Nazi perpetrators' exclusively.

In the late 1990s, two respected Russian sociologists, Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, conducted a survey of Russian society after the collapse of the USSR (Gudkov and Dubin 2001). Among their most important findings was that Russian society was characterized by 'conformism and collective ethical irresponsibility.' This feature of Russian culture is rooted in the social life under the Russian Empire and then the empire of the USSR. After centuries of living under total control of the state and constant reminders that people's opinions and lives were worth nothing, the main factor of a successful life and career was not competence, experience, or a level of education. Instead, it was loyalty - whether active or passive. Thus, even those who were very much aware of what Putin's regime was,

¹³ For example, in May 2022, Russian journalist and writer Viktor Shenderovich posted a video calling Russians not to blame themselves for being hostages of Putin's regime. The video got more than 200K views immediately: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/ybBJtCCOLro>

chose the strategy of keeping silent and waiting until Putin or his regime, or better both, would leave the stage.

The following features characterize the passive hostage strategy (the quotes are from the interviews I conducted).

1. Externalization of responsibility ('That is not my fault,' 'I myself have never killed anybody and would never do that,' 'The government/the President is in charge, not me,' 'That is all NATO's and EU's work,' 'I had no chance to affect the politics, why should I be responsible for the decisions I myself have not made?').
2. Learned helplessness and lost agency ('I cannot change anything,' 'people's voices do not matter in this country,' 'from all our past experience, I learned the lesson: we are nobody in this country, we cannot change the government's decisions,' 'People have never been able to stop any wars').
3. Over-identification with the nation ('I have no future outside Russia,' 'this is our cross, we have to bear it together,' 'we have to be together as a nation, otherwise we would be destroyed,' 'this is my country, I belong to it').
4. No future thinking ('I don't think of future anymore - what for?' 'I see no future for this country') or strong avoidance of imagining future ('I don't want to think of the future - we cannot forecast it anyway,' 'We had been speaking so much about the future before - and nothing of this happened. I don't want to waste my time trying to picture it; I'd better live today - that's it).

Overidentification with the nation/country, in most cases, leads to the dissolution of the self in the group, loss of agency (the nation/national leader is the sole agent), and thus to learned helplessness. This strategy is also a result of individuals' frustration; high country-identification that, in some cases, helped making individuals feel secure in earlier years now felt like a huge illusion. For example, learned helplessness coupled with no future thinking is reflected in part of what Anna (67, retired school teacher) said: 'We will never find out the truth: our mass media says one thing, Ukrainian media tells the other side of the story. I don't believe any of them. Everybody lies...One day, it will end somehow - better sooner than later. What comes after that, I have no clue. All we can do is to stay aside, live our lives, and focus on our family and work. Come what may.'

Or consider what Natalya (68, a colleague professor¹⁴) said about the future: 'I have always dreamed about a calm retirement. I wanted to play with my grandkids, care for them, and watch them grow up. Now, all my kids with their families and my grandkids live outside Russia. I feel lost. Everything I dreamed about is falling apart. I feel useless. I live from day to day; I don't think of the future anymore. It just makes no sense to me.'

In most cases, the disillusion in the group (country/nation) was not expressed directly, but it was reflected in how the present and the future were described: monotonous actions, concentration on routine, no expressive words or emotional phrases, no expectation for something good. These 'passive hostage' comments sound like feeling that the group you meant to belong to turned out to be not as good as it was supposed to be, but you cannot just leave it - because you are nothing without it.

The use of overidentification with the nation as part of a pattern of passive hostage syndrome and strong avoidness of (and defensiveness against) future thinking can be seen in the comments of Alexandra (39, a housewife¹⁵): 'At the beginning of the war, I was thinking about the future, particularly my kids' future. That my kids, Russians, would have their faces spat on and be mistreated everywhere just because they are

¹⁴ Date of the interview: December 12, 2022. Conducted by Zoom. Novosibirsk.

¹⁵ Date of the interview: June 10, 2022. Conducted by WhatsApp. Moscow.

Russians! That's all because of stupid anti-Russian propaganda! But my kids and I have nothing to do with that. That is unfair. And when my friends who live overseas say, 'I have always said that Russia and the Russians are a piece of sh*t,' it hurts me so much! Honestly, at this moment, I do not think about the future so much. It is too complicated; we see how all countries are against us, and I cannot imagine where we will end. But we will stay here: I know no place is better for us. In Europe, everything is falling apart, too. And they even dare to teach us!

When the strategy of 'passive hostage' was used, guilt was rarely brought up or, if mentioned, was simply externalized ('stupid anti-Russian propaganda,' 'those who started the war,' 'the Ukrainians and the West who has been pushing them to war,' 'Putin who lost his mind,' etc.). It could probably result from lost agency: if persons do not feel themselves a part of the decision-making process, they could hardly feel responsible for the results. In two cases, the 'passive hostage syndrome' was coupled with shame and empathy for the Ukrainians ('I cannot watch the news; the images of destroyed Mariupol and other Ukrainian cities make me feel shame,' 'I imagine a Ukrainian woman who lived just like me, and one day her apartment and everything she had was destroyed ... Nobody deserves this'). But in these cases, it did not lead to further analysis or reconfiguration of identity. Just to sadness.

Active hostage syndrome coupled with positive future thinking

*My fault, my war,
And death is also mine!*
Alexander Galich, 1968¹⁶

It is very hard to think about the future in a positive way when dealing with a very challenging and frustrating reality. However, in some interviews, a positive picture of the future appeared. The idea of a positive future for Russia affected the perception of the present and the past, pushing people to rethink it. In most cases, guilt, shame, or responsibility were involved, followed by the desire to 'fix the country' and improve its future.

Active hostage syndrome has the following characteristics:

1. Strong identification with the nation ('we,' 'our country,' 'our nation,' 'our future,' 'our people').
2. Active orientation towards the present and the future, but strong dependence of the circumstances ('when the regime is changed,' 'if the situation is different,' 'if I get a chance,' 'if the opposition comes to power').
3. Positive future thinking and taking an active position towards it ('When [the current political regime] changes, we will get a chance to fix what had been done,' 'I wish to be a part of it [democratical revolution]', 'We have to wait - Stalin died, and this one [Putin] will die, too. Sooner or later. And then, we will breathe easier').

'Active hostages strategy,' even though it reflects a lost agency in the present, still keeps it for the future: at present, there is no chance to change the political situation in the country, but a strong belief in having this change in the future was still present. In contrast to the 'passive hostages' discourse strategy, where overidentification with the country/nation meant dissolution, frustration, and lost agency, the 'active hostage' one is associated with having agency and belief that the group is 'generally good' even if its leaders

¹⁶ The poem was written as a reaction to the Soviet invention to Prague to suppress mass protests in 1968.

are bad. This belief seemed to motivate and push to imagine a positive outlook for the future - both personal and collective.

Ivan (36, journalist, emigrated from Russia in the fall of 2022¹⁷) said, 'I believe the regime will change; anyone would be better than Putin. I believe that even people from Putin's inner circle, like Medvedev and others, are just pretending to be crazy. But if they come to power, they could turn into a sort of democrats. And when it happens, people like us - well-educated and having international experience - will be needed and demanded again!'

Mikhail (35, a school teacher, emigrated from Russia in the summer 2022¹⁸) stated:

'I think I could return if the struggle between the rights and the liberals occurs, for instance. A situation similar to the August coup of 1991. If I could grant my family security and go back to join such a struggle myself, I would probably do that. Or - another scenario - if the system liberals manage to come to power and conduct the [democratic] reforms, I'd like to be a part of this process, again if it would be safe and secure. I still keep hoping it is possible.'

In some cases, positive future thinking was coupled with the internalization of guilt and served as a motivation to fix the mistakes in the future ('I realize that I am responsible for what is happening in this country,' 'I feel guilty right now,' 'I am devastated by what my country is doing,' 'We all are responsible for that').

Marina (29, an actress¹⁹) said: 'I feel somehow guilty because I was not interested, I was unaware, I did not have my own point of view [on politics] before. I mean, I cannot say that one single person set off this war. Every single day, I try to understand how all this happened, how we got here'. Imagining the potential results of the war, she referred to the past again: 'Any outcome would be better than our loss; any sort of agreement would be better than that. Because, if we lose this war, in the eyes of the whole world, which is cancelling us now, we would be even worse than the Germans have been [under Hitler]. Because Russia had learned the hard way [during WWII] what it is to be attacked and defend your land, and even knowing that, it still unleashed this war...We will be pariahs for centuries'. However, she also said, 'We all have to keep dreaming and help each other. To multiply and share the good. To be creative. That should save us'.

However, the 'active hostage' strategy did not necessarily refer to admitting and internalizing guilt or taking responsibility. In four out of nine cases of usage of the 'active hostage' defensive strategy, guilt, when brought up in discourse, was externalized (to Putin, 'radical militarists' or the West) or silenced ('I feel guilty right now ... But I don't want to speak about it'). 'Active hostage' defensive discourse is often focused on the optimistic picture of the future and the expectation of changes for the better; it displaces potential consequences of the crimes committed by the country.

Denial of identity coupled with negative future thinking

Previous research (Di Giuseppe and Perry 2021) has shown that neurotic denial serves to prevent subjects from recognizing specific feelings, wishes, intentions, or actions for which they might be responsible. The denial makes it possible to avoid admitting or becoming aware of a psychic fact (idea and feeling) that subjects believe would bring them adverse consequences (such as shame, grief, or other painful effects). Denial is

¹⁷ Date of the interview: November 27, 2022. Conducted person-to-person, audio recorded. Yerevan, Armenia.

¹⁸ Date of the interview: October 10, 2022. Conducted via Zoom. Nicosia, Cyprus.

¹⁹ Date of the interview: October 14, 2022. Conducted by Zoom. Moscow.

supposed to be the first step to acceptance. But in some cases, this first step turns out to be the last one, and acceptance does not follow.

Denial of identity as a defense discourse strategy is characterized by:

1. Dissociation with all ‘national’: national identity, citizenship, country, government, etc. Even the word ‘our’ was used by them to emphasize the separation (‘our people’ vs. themselves, or ‘our people’ vs. ‘normal people’) rather than the unity. Describing the situation in the country and characterizing the Russian people, they are stepping aside and playing the role of observers.
2. Denial or partial admission of guilt/responsibility, but shifting it mainly to the political leaders and bigger entities rather than to people and themselves (‘responsibility is lying on the European leaders who have been dealing with Putin all this time,’ ‘I feel bad about what Russia is doing in Ukraine but this is not my fault, I have never voted for this government - why should I be responsible?’).
3. Negative perception of the country/nation and the rejection of it (‘I am an atomized subject,’ ‘I consider myself a cosmopolitan,’ ‘I do not feel any connection with this country anymore’)
4. Negative future thinking (‘nothing will change in this country,’ ‘nothing good is coming,’ ‘this country is going to hell’).

Denial of identity goes hand-in-hand with strong negative feelings toward the country/nation individuals belong to. These negative feelings (expressed as disgust, anger, hatred, etc.) affect the desire to ‘cut’ this ‘bad identity’ away in order to feel free from it. A sober assessment of the crimes committed by the group led to forecasting the worst possible scenarios for the country’s future - and the desire to distance from it.

An example of negative future thinking coupled with denial of identity can be found in the comment by Nikolay (28, a business analyst who left Russia in the fall of 2022²⁰) spoke of a negative future when he said: ‘Obviously, nothing good is coming, and those who stayed in Russia will have to clean up all this mess.’. And when speaking, distancing himself from responsibility for the war and denying his identification with it, he said: ‘I am not responsible for Putin’s coming to power; I had just finished kindergarten and started my first grade then. I have never voted for him . . . I am against collective responsibility; responsibility is lying on the European leaders who have been dealing with Putin all this time, buying oil from him, who sanctioned Russia not strictly enough after [the annexation of] Crimea. Their behaviour led to the war. And now they are trying to blame the Russians, including those who protested. I cannot agree to be blamed; I do not feel either guilty or involved.’ And when discussing any feeling of being blamed for his nation’s present, past, and future, Nikolay buried his national identification and tried to create a new one with a zero-nationality. ‘I declared at the beginning of the war. I want to cut it entirely from myself [...] I want to find a country I consider mine - by my own choice, not my birth. [...] I hate the patriotism discourse. I consider myself a cosmopolitan. I do not believe in the idea of nations.’

When it came to dissociating oneself from Russian society, Sergey (46, professor of several Moscow universities²¹) argued that it is totally sick and requires extensive treatment. He used the terms ‘helpless,’ ‘overly cynical,’ ‘infantile,’ and ‘aggressive’ and noted that nationalism and chauvinism existed in it even before the war, asserting. ‘That was not like on February 24 we all woke up in a completely different country. No! That is an illusion of transformation! Though, I have never thought these [nationalistic] ideas would be

²⁰ Date of the interview: November 25, 2022. Conducted in person, audio recorded. Yerevan, Armenia.

²¹ Date of the interview: October 25, 2022. Conducted via Zoom. Moscow.

dominant . . . [such as] the ‘Russian world’ idea in a multinational country.’. During the interview, it appeared that he was describing someone else’s national history, a history to which he was not attached. And then he articulated it calmly and clearly by saying, ‘I have nothing to do with this state, no connection. It is all gone. I cannot associate myself with the state that initiated and has been a centre of the war, no matter the reasons. I am an atomized subject. I have no debt towards it. People always forget that it is they who provide the state.’ He considered people in charge of the state as inexperienced ‘kids,’ and he shifted most responsibility to the Russian government. He put his sole hope into the idea of the International Tribunal for Putin: ‘The Hague would be an ideal decision. Happiness. This person [Putin] must sit there and think about the futility of what he created, about how small and nasty he is. No martyrdom is needed. Let him stay alone, sit and think.’

Olga (41, a former professional gymnast who emigrated from Russia to the USA in May 2022²²) shared that she felt deep compassion for Ukrainian victims and, at the same time, total alienation from Russia. However, her lost national identity frustrated her: ‘I am definitely on Ukraine’s side. I can’t associate myself with the Russian Federation. However, it’s excruciating for me since it means I am nobody after all: with no Motherland, with no identity.’ Olga admitted that at the beginning of the war, she even did a genetic test to determine if she was Russian: ‘You know, this war has pushed me to take a genetic test. I have been praying not to be a pure-blooded Russian. You see, this war makes me a bit crazy, yeah. I don’t feel ashamed for being Russian; I just don’t want to be associated with them [those who participate in and support the war and Putin’s regime]... They are not me, and I am not them. And there are a lot of Russians who feel the same [as me]. ‘One flew east, and one flew west, and one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.’ I am over the cuckoo’s nest.’

Thinking of ‘Ukraine’s bright future,’ she said, ‘kept her staying positive,’ whereas Russia’s future she saw only in a negative light. She associated Russia with a ‘dead body.’ When asked about the possibility of her return, she imagined it as a sort of memorial ceremony: ‘I believe I would be pretty old by this time since it would be not Putin’s time, not even his successor’s regime, no matter what it would be. I would come there like to a memorial - to lay flowers at it. That’s how I see myself visiting Russia so far. I definitely am not considering living there in the near future, and I will hardly change this decision. I have no connection with home like that’s where my roots are, that’s my motherland, my culture, something I should care about - nothing like this. Perhaps it is bad, but that’s how I really feel. A sort of a renegade.’

Dmitry²³ (44, a former military doctor who fought in the Second Chechen War²⁴) was, at the time of our telephone interview, hiding in Karelia’s forests, trying to escape from being drafted and being sent to Ukraine. He said he agreed to speak to me and share his ideas with me because he has been sick and tired of ‘this system and this regime,’ ‘this country and these people.’ When, at the beginning of the interview, I used the word ‘our’ (i.e., ‘our government’), he got furious: ‘You said ‘our.’ I can’t stand this word. My first association with this word is that at the Siege of Leningrad, people knocked at the door and said, “open the door, it’s ours [Russians]” and then came in and killed and even ate the owners. I don’t believe in this ‘our’/‘our people’ anymore, these ‘our people’

²² Date of the interview: August 10, 2022. Conducted via Zoom. Santa-Monica, the USA.

²³ Date of the interview: November 6, 2022. Conducted by phone, recorder. At that moment Vladimir was on the way from Petrozavodsk to Staraya Ladoga, Russia.

²⁴ The Second Chechen War, or the Second Russian–Chechen War took place in Chechnya and the border regions of the North Caucasus between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, from August 1999 to April 2009.

are like creatures from a different planet to me. These ‘ours’ who take arms and go fight, not knowing where or why, what position they intend to defend in this way - I cannot understand this at all, can’t get what they are thinking about, if they still have some thinking to do.’

The unexpected reference to the history of the Leningrad Siege - not to its heroic and glorious moments, but its most terrifying ones - was probably captured in Dmitry’s memory as proof of the dehumanization of the nation and the absence of empathy - even within the Russian nation itself. ‘Cannibalistic attitude’ - that’s how he characterized the attitude of the government to the people. Dmitry saw the same ‘cannibalistic attitude’ as a longstanding practice in Russia: ‘Looking back, we see that people who had gained real battlefield experience and became social outcasts. Not the society, but the state itself will fear these people [...] No matter what side you have been fighting for, the state will not need you anymore when the war is over. These people got used to being someone’s instrument, a weapon, so with their help, an armed coup can be conducted. And the government will do whatever it takes to get rid of them’.

Dmitry said there is no reason to expect anything new in the future. He referred to his dialogue with a woman who lived next to him. She sent two of her sons to the war in Ukraine and was very proud of them. He said: ‘She said to me, ‘Everybody raised the rabbits, and I raised the tigers.’ That was about her sons. That everybody raised cowardly rabbits, and she has brave tigers. ‘Your tigers,’ I said, ‘will be skinned as well, and their skins will be hung on the wall’. And then, he added: ‘They all will die there [in Ukraine], and the authorities will not stop until all masculine population of Russia is destroyed [...], ‘Everything will be worse [in the future] because when all this ends, the devastation will come. And payback.’

Running out into the deep forest, Dmitry wanted to separate himself and survive and have his personal identity deny his national one. ‘Our so-called nation is stupid people who don’t even want to understand what is going on with them. I do not associate myself with them. I am alone,’ However, even while trying to cut himself off from the nation, a kind of realization of collective responsibility could be identified in his words: ‘We knew that we were living in the kingdom of evil, the kingdom of lies. We all knew where it was going. Everybody knew that [...] But probably we were meant to go through this meatgrinder.’

These excerpts reveal that people can use not just one, but several different defensive discourse strategies. In Dmitry’s speech, we can find features of the denial of the identity strategy, but apparently, the recognition and even partial acceptance of responsibility as a reaction to his negative future thinking (as a part of active hostage syndrome or fragmentation of the identity) is there to be seen, too. In Olga’s speech, we can find denial of identity but quite a positive picture of the personal future. It can be explained by taking into account the factor of agency: the denial of identity in most cases meant the entire ‘cutting’ of the uncontrollable (and uncomfortable) part out of the self (the country and its people) and keeping one where the agency is still can be saved. The image of a personal future can vary (and strongly depend on individual state and feelings), whereas the country’s future and identification with it are always negative. Guilt and shame always accompany the denial of identity discourse strategy. Still, its perception can also vary: from realization and internalization (Olga’s case) to externalization (Nikolay) or partly externalization (Sergey, Dmitry).

Fragmented identity coupled with fragmented future thinking

In some cases, anxiety about the national future can trigger deep reflection about the past and the present; usually, guilt, shame, and inability to accept the very dark sides of

national history are involved. The war became a turning point for many Russians to ask themselves unpleasant questions: Why did it happen to us? What is wrong with us? If total denial is not an option and the national identity can not be totally rejected, the ego can resort to fragmentation to defend itself from the painful reality. Indicators of the strategy of identity fragmentation include:

1. A split picture of the nation, where one part is acceptable for a person, whereas the other one is completely unacceptable, and the existence of the second is still recognized (for instance, 'I love Russian culture, but I hate its politics'). The general image of the country/nation is, therefore, neither all 'good' nor all 'bad.'
2. Bringing up alternative terms or synonyms to oppose the unpleasant part and to create 'a safe zone' for personal identity ('country' vs. 'government'; 'the Russian' vs. 'the Russian citizen' or 'the Russian taxpayer'; 'the national past' vs. 'national future.'
3. Strong guilt/shame feelings, which could be conscious ('I feel guilty that I was politically irresponsible before [...], I benefited from this regime') or unconscious ('Meeting Ukrainians makes me anxious, I don't know how to look at their eyes'), internalized ('We all are guilty of this horror') or externalized ('A part of me was taken away, stolen').
4. A negative image of the national future, whereas the picture of the personal future, can still be positive if the agenda remains ('I don't believe anything will change for the better even after the war ends [...] I am excited about the future because it depends on me; I can control it.')

Fragmentation does not make reality easier for people - it just makes it bearable. Most respondents who demonstrated fragmentation as a defense mechanism had emigrated from Russia. Dealing with emigration often involves a sort of 'doubleness.' As Svetlana Boym stated, 'The main future of exile is a double conscience, a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation' (Boym 2001, p. 255). Most respondents who dealt with the fragmentation of identity seemed to be aware of what they were doing, and many of them spoke of their inner struggle and used phrases such as 'I separate' or 'I divide.'

In contrast to previously described schemata, which express a somewhat unified position towards the country and its future (negative, positive, or conscious avoidance), fragmentation of identity is more complex. It reflects constant inner struggle and an intensive process of figuring and re-figuring out what the country really is and individuals' relations with it. It involves the realization of the nation's wrongdoing but an inability to dissociate oneself from it entirely - the entire identification with it is impossible, too. It has some parallels with the process of separation from 'abusive parents': one can leave them behind to stop 'toxic relations' (which is always painful and challenging) but still have a sense of belongingness to the family, whether one likes it or not.

These issues appeared at several points in the interviews. Arina (38, fitness coach²⁵) asserted, 'I would say I divide Russia into Russia as a country and Russia as a state. My attitude towards Russia as a state, i.e., the political leaders who run wild, is totally negative. But my attitude towards Russia as a country is and will always be positive. By this, I mean the places I love, birch trees, cities, people.'

Georgy (26, musician)²⁶ said, 'There is a phrase: I love my country but hate the state. That's how I feel. [...] I also separate 'motherland' from 'the state.' The state is a

²⁵ Date of the interview: October 31, 2022. Conducted via WhatsApp. Sacramento, the USA.

²⁶ Date of the interview: November 20, 2022. Conducted in person, recorded. Yerevan, Armenia.

bureaucratic machine that deals with the army, taxes, etc. I can say I love my motherland, but I wouldn't say I like the state. [...] Yes, my Russian passport causes a lot of trouble now. But I don't want to cut this part of my identity or destroy it entirely. My country is my mentality, social connections, friendship, and nature, so it is more than the army or taxes.[...] Yes, this belonging [to Russia] creates pressure, but I am learning to live with it. I don't want to erase this part of myself.'

In most cases, the reason for the fragmentation of the identity seems to be the trauma of shame/guilt. In comparison to the previous discourse strategies, when the 'fragmentation of identity' strategy was applied, shame/guilt/responsibility were always mentioned in the discourse. This shameful part of the national identity is supposed to be cut off and dissociated from a 'good' part of the identity. Sometimes, these feelings were named bluntly: 'We all are guilty of this horror' (Arina), 'I feel guilty that I was politically irresponsible before, that, because of my family, I benefited from this regime' (Adriana, 25, a writer²⁷). In other cases, it appeared when speaking about possible judgments by outsiders, for example, Ukrainians. In this connection, Georgy said, 'When I see anti-war demonstrations of Ukrainians [in Armenia], I don't know how to behave. I feel uncomfortable. I speed up a step and pass them by.'

When asked about the future, those who demonstrated fragmentation described Russia's future as uncertain but negative, whereas their personal future was seen as more specific, controlled, and positive.

Adriana said she would hardly want to return to Russia since she just 'saw no evidence of positive changes in the future': 'The opposition is bought and corrupted; I don't believe anything will change for the better even after the war ends. For me to consider returning, there should be too many changes: repression should be stopped, laws should be rewritten ... But I don't think it will be done'. Speaking about her own future, she was more positive: 'My boyfriend and I will go to Canada. We will establish a publishing house and publish the books that deserve to be published- there are so many of them! We want, you know, to plant a tree, have a son [laughing]. Even though I am not a citizen here [in Armenia], I am excited about the future because it depends on me; I can control it.'

Arina thought Russia would face a huge economic crisis and the situation would worsen. She did not believe in changes either since people supported Putin. 'Here, a person lives in the middle of nowhere, in khalupa [an old Russian word that means half-ruined old house], poor as a church mouse, but still worships Putin. And that is what we see everywhere in Russia! It will remain, I am sure. It's such a pain for me to realize it!' When interviewed, Polina was in the USA and looked into the future with positivity and pleasure: 'I am happy we didn't stay there, and my daughter will be educated here, in the States. Here, nobody cares about your identity or place of birth. Here, everybody is just a human being'.

So far, I talked about those who experienced fragmentation of identity after they had emigrated from Russia. But one respondent, Anastasia (41, a manager²⁸), who was still in Russia at the moment of the interview, described the same feeling and called it 'ambivalence.' Her relatives from her father's side were Ukrainians, and she visited them frequently when she was a child: 'Sakhanka, Mariupol, Kramatorsk. Sea and scorpions in a can, green walnuts, and mulberry.' Looking back to the past, she felt like 'her childhood, her Ukraine was taken away': 'In the past, my family was dispossessed [raskulachena], then people were left alone, and lived relatively normal for some time. And here we are again. F***! My childhood was taken away. Ukraine from my childhood, Crimea - I have not been there since I was 15 and will not be in the future, I think ... A part of me was taken away,

²⁷ Date of the interview: November 20, 2022. Conducted in person, recorded. Yerevan, Armenia.

²⁸ Date of the interview: October 13, 2022. Conducted via WhatsApp. Moscow.

stolen.’ Anastasia was experiencing an inner struggle between two parts of herself - Ukrainian and Russian, past and future and this created great ‘ambivalence’ that was very painful for her. This ambivalence that made it hard to decide about her personal future: ‘Plans ... We have already booked tickets for me and my kid. My husband has already flown away. My [oldest] daughter will stay here [in Russia], she is a student. As a result, one day we are here, the next day - there ... One day, I want to stay here; the next day, I want to fly away. Ambivalence, as I said ... I love Moscow, but I hate what is going on now ... Like I have a home - and don’t have it simultaneously.’

‘Love-hate’ relationship with the country and country-identification issue is mirrored in the same controversial attitude towards the self. However, in most cases, agency was absent when imagining the country’s future. In contrast, the personal future seemed more controllable and, therefore, more predictable in most cases (but in Anastasia’s case, both the personal and the country’s futures were described as vague). As I mentioned, guilt and shame, in most cases, underlie the fragmentation, but not in all cases they were internalized and worked through.

Discussion and conclusion

‘To understand is not necessarily to pardon,
but there is no harm in trying to understand’
H.D.F. Kitto (2007, p.132)

In this paper, I have outlined four discursive strategies used by Russians that reflect their views about the future as they live in the midst of the war with Ukraine: passive hostage syndrome with no future thinking (found in 16 interviews), active hostage syndrome coupled with positive future thinking (found in 9 interviews), denial of identity coupled with negative future thinking (found in 7 interviews), and fragmentation of identity coupled with fragmented future thinking (found in 12 interviews). Many interviewees (24 out of 32) used more than one of these strategies in their comments, reflecting the fact that my goal was to identify strategies rather than categorize individuals into groups.

The interviews suggest that agency plays a significant role in imagining a positive or negative image of the future. When agency seems to be lost in dealing with the country (the ‘passive hostage syndrome,’ the ‘denial of identity,’ and the ‘fragmentation of identity’ discourse strategies), a negative image of the national future prevails. When the national future, even if not controllable at the moment, feels potentially controllable in the future (‘active hostage’ discourse), it shapes a more positive outlook of the country’s future. The same is true for the personal future.

No fixed patterns of the emergence and internalization of guilt, shame, and responsibility were documented. The main reason for this is the strong defensiveness that underlies all the interviewees’ comments. This defensiveness becomes even stronger when speaking about the future because of the anxiety about facing collective punishment for the crimes committed by the country. At this point, even rare examples of admitting personal and group responsibility meet criticism, resistance, and misunderstanding from most social groups of Russian society. Probably, more time will have to pass before significant shifts in people’s consciousness can happen; it could also depend on the course and outcome of the war.

The whole spectrum of different and, in some cases, opposite visions of the future indicated in this paper and the fact that the majority of respondents used more than one defensive discourse strategies can be a sign of a significant process of featuring or re-figuring our identity that is occurring in Russian society and leads to fragmentation - for on individual and collective levels. This fragmentation is almost invisible if we

consider the official statistics or Putin's approval rating of 85%²⁹. This paper gives crucial insights into what stays behind the statistics and how complicated the real picture of Russian society really is.

An important limitation of this study is that it did not cover the discourse of a huge group of Russians who still strongly identify themselves with the state and fully support its policy. This group did not suffer from any identity crisis so far; moreover, their state-identity is getting even higher than before, along with their defensiveness against 'outgroups' ('The collective West, NATO, foreigners, 'national betrayers,' 'fifth column,' etc.). Some of them truly believe in Putin's justification of the war; for others, state support refers to what they understand by patriotism, 'men's job,' or 'been a faithful citizen of the country.' Anyway, at that moment, this group was outside of the frame of my research interest and can be a subject of further examination.

The other limitation is that most respondents were from the European part of the Russian Federation, which is the most developed one, and fewer suffered from mobilization. Examination of how the country-identification is changing in the national republics (such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Republic of Tuva, Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardina Balkaria, etc.) can be even more fascinating because, in these regions, the identity transformation is going hand-in-hand with figuring out national/ethnic identification (increasing popularity of national languages as opposed to the Russian, returning national traditions and national histories, mass actions in support of local political activists). This process can potentially lead to a new struggle for independence and/or particular rights, freedoms, and benefits in these regions in the future.

Previous studies of future thought have focused mainly on societies in relatively stable conditions; none of them has been conducted in the midst of a conflict, at the time when the trauma is actually happening. However, exploring a society that is going through a war and a crisis of national consciousness and figuring out the potential future can be of special interest to both academics and political analysts.

In this paper, I analyzed the interviews I collected during the first year of the war. As can be seen in these interviews, there is a range of ways to try to cope with this situation, and Russians are busy casting about for the best one to make sense of the future of their nation as well as of themselves as members of a community. It will be interesting to revisit their forms of future thinking and anxiety as events unfold in the future. Exploring the transformation of future thinking can not only help us understand the hidden process of deep fragmentation inside Russian society that is going on in the present. It can also be used for forecasting society's potential reaction to future changes.

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²⁹ <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>

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