Higher Education as Battleground: Russian Fulbright Students' War-related Narratives as Transitions to Civic Development

Violetta Soboleva[1] & Colette Daiute[1]

[1] Department of Educational Psychology, CUNY Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309, USA

Correspondence: Violetta Soboleva, Department of Educational Psychology, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309, USA. https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1527-686X. E-mail: vsoboleva@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Abstract

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has significantly impacted Russian international students, particularly those participating in the Fulbright Program in the United States. We explore their narratives to understand how they perceive and navigate their war-related experiences. Using dynamic narrative inquiry, the research analyzes first-person accounts, letters, and fictional third-person stories by students across three cohorts (2021, 2022, and 2023)—Fulbright cohorts at different points in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The dynamic narrative inquiry research design invited first-person accounts, letters, and fictional third-person stories engaging the participants in different author-purpose-audience stances, which is especially relevant in writing about contentious situations. Values analysis of the 1,165 sentences across the 39 narratives, letters, and stories reveals five main value orientations: interpersonal relationships, social and political engagement, coping mechanisms, personal development and growth, and recognizing and validating the challenges. Participants used each genre to express different experiences and knowledge: first-person narratives emphasized emotional processing and civic reflection, letters balanced personal vulnerability with caution toward real or imagined audiences, and third-person fiction enabled safer engagement with politically sensitive issues. Cross-cohort comparisons revealed that pre-war students more openly expressed civic and political concerns, while during-war participants emphasized personal well-being and emotional regulation, reflecting heightened fear and moral fatigue after the invasion. These patterns illustrate how narrative genres functioned as mediational tools through which students balanced safety and civic ambiguity. The findings contribute to research on youth civic development in authoritarian contexts by showing how storytelling becomes a form of cautious civic engagement amid geopolitical rupture.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, Fulbright, Russia, war, authoritarian context

1. Introduction

The Fulbright Program has long served as a bridge for mutual understanding between the United States and Russia, facilitating academic and cultural exchanges (Rapoport, 2008). However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has drastically altered this dynamic, placing Russian Fulbright students in a precarious position (Fisher, 2024). Russia has declared this once favorable opportunity for its young intellectuals an "enemy" venue: what was once a pathway to broadening global perspectives has become a potential source of risk because returning to Russia, as Fulbright requires, now entails facing persecution (Soboleva, 2024). The shift in context means that these study-abroad students are navigating new war-related challenges, including social exclusion, struggles with national identity, and political risks associated with returning home. With Russian identity increasingly tied to Putin's aggression, these students may experience complex feelings of shame, guilt, and alienation from their homeland (Gleichgewicht, 2023).

The psychological impacts of large-scale geopolitical conflicts have been extensively documented across different regions worldwide (Dar & Deb, 2022; Musisi & Kinyanda, 2020; Priebe et al., 2012). However, recent research on the war in Ukraine predominantly focuses on the mental health outcomes of Ukrainian victims (Hyland et al., 2023; McElroy et al., 2023; Osokina et al., 2023), leaving the experiences of young Russians who oppose the war and strive for democratic ideals underexplored. These Russian Fulbright scholars face unique pressures, as their identities are caught between conflicting values. Russians abroad are associated with state-sponsored aggression, while also

being affiliated with programs funded by what Russia has labeled "unfriendly countries" (TASS, 2022). This dilemma creates a state of civic limbo, where expressing dissent is fraught with personal risk, but aligning with the state's official stance compromises their moral integrity. Moreover, these tensions are not only personal, but also civic in nature. To understand how young people respond to crisis and displacement, it is first necessary to define the broader frameworks of political and civic engagement that shape their possibilities for action.

Political or civic engagement "describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). Beyond individual actions, it fosters social responsibility, political efficacy, and collective efforts for social change (Adler & Goggin, 2005). With youth shifting their civic interests from national to local issues and adopting alternative to direct political participation forms of civic engagement, there has been a decline in traditional political engagement, such as voting, party membership, and participation in formal political institutions in Western countries (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Brunton-Smith and Barrett (2015) suggest that political participation and civic engagement should be treated as distinct yet overlapping domains, where "participation" should be understood as behavioral in nature and "engagement" as more psychological, with a focus on an individual's interest in political or civic matters.

However, most of this research assumes relatively open democratic contexts. In authoritarian regimes—especially coercive autocracies that rely on intimidation, legal repression, and state violence (Levitsky & Way, 2010)—civic engagement is distorted by fear, surveillance, and the threat of retaliation. Individuals may outwardly display loyalty or civic passivity not because of genuine support for the regime, but to avoid personal risk. As a result, civic actions (or inactions) cannot be automatically interpreted as authentic reflections of political identity or civic values. Understanding civic engagement in authoritarian contexts requires close attention to how fear, repression, and moral compromise shape both internal orientations and outward actions. These pressures also cultivate early forms of what this paper later conceptualizes as expression of suppression—narrative patterns shaped by fear, scrutiny, and the need to signal safety while navigating political risk. One group that exemplifies these tensions in an especially acute way are Russian Fulbright students navigating the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

1.1 Enemies of the Russian State or Cultural Ambassadors? Russian Fulbright Students in a Time of War

The Russian Fulbright Scholar Program has facilitated invaluable educational and cultural exchanges between Russia and the United States since its establishment in 1972 (Fulbright, 2023). Over 2,400 Russian students, academics, professionals, and teachers have completed graduate degrees, conducted research, and taught in American universities with Fulbright funding over the past five decades. However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has drastically altered this dynamic, placing current Fulbright students from Russia in an especially precarious position.

Russian Fulbright students represent a particularly complex and high-stakes case within this broader context. First, as participants in a prestigious international academic exchange program, they were selected not only for their academic merit, but also for their potential to embody values such as democracy, open-mindedness, and cross-cultural understanding—values in direct conflict with the political direction of their home country. Second, Fulbright participants are expected to return home at the end of their program, now facing a heightened risk of political repression or persecution if they are perceived as disloyal. Third, by virtue of their status as representatives of Russia abroad, these students are uniquely exposed to tensions between personal convictions, the national identity of their home country, and potential affiliation with a new country during a time when their home country's international reputation has dramatically deteriorated (Chernaya, 2024).

The deterioration of Russia's international standing has had profound personal and professional consequences for these students. Particularly, a majority of Ukrainians hold the opinion that all Russians are responsible for the war in Ukraine, whether they are directly involved in the war or not (Pohorilov, 2023). In response to this imposed guilt, Russian students may blame themselves, feel ashamed, or even reject their national identity since the war began (Spatz, 2023; Wang, 2022). Despite some Russian Fulbrighters openly opposing the war by signing anti-war letters (Notion, 2022), they lack protection from the United States against the requirement to return to Russia and face persecution.

The Russian government has increasingly framed Fulbright scholars and other graduates of U.S. exchange programs as potential "foreign agents" and a "fifth column" (Soboleva, 2024). Public statements by high-ranking officials, including the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, have described former participants of educational exchanges as security threats allegedly mobilizable for political destabilization (Reed, 2024). In response to these escalating threats, Fulbright administrators removed identifying information about Russian scholars from their public directory for safety reasons (Soboleva, 2024).

Once cheered as cultural ambassadors, Russian Fulbright students are now increasingly seen as potential enemies on multiple fronts: by their own government for studying abroad, by Ukraine for their national affiliation, and by the U.S. as immigrants expected to return to a hostile state. This triple suspicion deepens the moral, psychological, and legal risks these students face. Moreover, beyond direct political impacts and threats to freedom and safety, Russian students face disruptions such as indefinite family separation and severed professional trajectories (Fazackerley, 2022; Wang, 2022). In these conditions, narratives do not simply convey experiences, but also serve to mediate them. As Daiute (2014) argues, in adverse contexts, narrating becomes a tool for managing disruption, making sense of life changes, protecting oneself, and cautiously working through emotions that cannot always be safely expressed.

Building on this context, we introduce the concept of expression of suppression as an interpretive lens to examine how Russian Fulbright students narrate their experiences under fear, censorship, and political risk. We expect that, rather than offering open or spontaneous accounts, their narratives will reflect careful negotiation, strategically balancing expression and silence. In this framing, even personal storytelling becomes a mediated act shaped by what can be safely shared, withheld, or implied.

1.2 A Dynamic Research Approach for Dynamic Life Circumstances

This section situates the methodological approach within narrative theory and cultural-historical psychology. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1986), Vygotsky (1978), and Daiute (2014), we conceptualize narratives not as fixed reflections of experience, but as cultural tools individuals use to mediate between inner emotions, social expectations, and historical disruptions. Narrating becomes a means of managing contradictions, expressing suppressed perspectives, and navigating dynamic life circumstances with caution.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits language as a key cultural mediator linking inner mental life to the external world. In Mind in Society (1978), he describes speech and storytelling as tools that shape thought and behavior, not merely reflect them. Language allows individuals to interpret, influence, and adapt to their environment. For example, a child speaking through frustration uses egocentric speech to regulate emotion and guide action; if blocked from doing so, they may "freeze." Similarly, in contexts of conflict, young people's narratives—spoken, written, or imagined—externalize fear and hope, making them more manageable and socially intelligible (Daiute, 2017). Thus, storytelling becomes a culturally shaped tool for processing trauma and fostering agency through shared meaning-making.

Bakhtin complements this view by emphasizing narrative's inherently dialogic nature. In Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (1986), Bakhtin argues that every utterance (including a personal story) is fundamentally shaped by its social context and its audience. He introduces the concept of addressivity, or the quality of being directed to someone. Unlike an abstract sentence, a complete narrative utterance always has an intended listener or reader in mind (Bakhtin, 1986). The narrator anticipates how listeners might respond and subtly adjusts tone, language, and content in advance. This dynamic shapes how stories are told. A youth may recount the same experience differently to peers versus authority figures, adjusting tone, content, and genre to fit perceived expectations. Narrative genres carry assumptions about audience and influence meaning; therefore, we expect that the prospective audience will shape the Fulbright students' stories as well.

Building on these foundations, Daiute offers a contemporary view of narrative as a dynamic tool for meaning-making and coping in conflict and post-conflict settings. In Narrative Inquiry: A Dynamic Approach (2014), Daiute emphasizes that narrating is an active process that people use to manage extreme situations. She notes that narrative's power lies not in being a static record of life events, but in how it interacts with life. In volatile contexts, "we use storytelling to do things—to connect with other people, to deal with social structures defining our lives, to make sense of what is going on around us, to craft our own way of fitting in with those situations, and sometimes to change them" (Daiute, 2014, p.3). In these settings, narratives serve as tools for survival and development, helping individuals regulate their emotions and assert their agency when ordinary avenues are blocked.

Building on these insights, we examine how Russian Fulbright students narrate their experiences of war, displacement, and civic disruption following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We approach their storytelling as a culturally and politically mediated process, focusing on how young people from an aggressor state manage identity reconstruction, moral tension, and suppressed expression under authoritarian pressure. Through this narrative lens, we explore how students grapple with conflicting values, shifting civic identities, and life transitions in the context of fear, exile, and global conflict.

2. Research Design and Methodology

Guided by the conceptual framework outlined above, we approach the narratives of Russian Fulbright students as culturally and politically mediated acts of meaning-making. Drawing on dynamic narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014), we examine how Fulbright students, living abroad and in Russia during a time of war and repression, use different storytelling genres to navigate tensions between civic responsibility, personal safety, and moral integrity. Rather than prioritizing coherence or stability across narratives, the analysis attends to shifts in values, audience positioning, and genre adaptations, illuminating how these young people construct and protect meaning under conditions of fear and uncertainty.

Narrative values analysis (Daiute, 2014) was used to examine participants' culturally-situated priorities and the pragmatic force of their storytelling. Values are understood as "culturally-specific goals, ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting in response to environmental, cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances" (Daiute et al., 2003, p. 85). This analytic method identifies how participants use narrative to express values related to national identity, political authority, belonging, and morality (Daiute, 2014). Importantly, the analysis also attends to genre-specific shifts in value articulation—how participants may foreground empathy or victimhood in first-person narratives, caution in letters, and critique or satire in fictional accounts.

This approach situates narrative not simply as a form of expression, but as a mediational practice through which individuals engage with socio-political disruption, identity transitions, and moral dilemmas. As demonstrated in previous work with youth in post-conflict settings (Daiute, 2010; Daiute & Kovacs-Cerovic, 2017), genre variation invites narrators to perform different relational stances, revealing the pressures and possibilities that shape expression in wartime contexts. We extend this framework to Russian Fulbright students navigating displacement, surveillance, and value conflicts in the aftermath of state-sponsored violence. Analyzing how they speak, to whom, and in what form illuminates how civic and moral identities are shaped—not in spite of contradiction, but through it.

The participant sample included 13 Russian students who were awarded Fulbright scholarships to study in the United States between 2021 and 2023. Because the Fulbright Program removed Russian scholars from public directories after the full-scale invasion and the restrictive laws that followed, participants were located through cohort-specific Telegram groups and direct outreach. In recent years, the Visiting Graduate Student track has included no more than about thirty Russian awardees annually, which means the available population during the 2021–2023 period was extremely small. As with most voluntary qualitative studies, recruitment through cohort-specific Telegram groups carries the possibility of self-selection, meaning participants may differ in unknown ways from those who did not respond (Maxwell, 2013). Because political expression among Russian Fulbright students involves personal and legal risk, it is not possible to determine whether those who participated were more or less politically vocal than those who declined.

Eligibility criteria required that participants be current or former Fulbright students originally from Russia who were enrolled or intended to be enrolled in U.S. programs during the period surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The sample captures three critical cohorts: the 2021 awardees, representing the final pre-war group; the 2022 cohort, who experienced the immediate onset of the war during their exchange; and the 2023 cohort, the last to participate before Fulbright operations in Russia were suspended (Chernaya, 2024).

For analytical purposes, we refer to these as "pre-war" (2021) and "during-war" (2022–2023) cohorts to reflect the significant shift in sociopolitical and emotional context following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 45 years old; full demographic distribution can be found in Table 1. Because this is an in-depth qualitative study of a hard-to-reach and politically vulnerable population, the sample size of 13 is appropriate for narrative analysis—the findings are not statistically generalizable, but they provide insight into the lived experience of these cohorts (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Maxwell, 2013).

Table 1. Participants Demographic Information (N = 13)

Variable	Category	n	Percent
Gender	Female	9	69.2%
	Male	4	30.8%
Age Range	18–24	2	15.4%
	25–35	10	76.9%
	36–45	1	7.7%
Country of Residence	Russia	4	30.8%
	United States	8	61.5%
	Another Country	1	7.7%
Cohort (detailed)	2021	6	46.2%
	2022	3	23.1%
	2023	4	30.8%
Cohort (grouped)	Pre-war (2021)	6	46.2%
	During-war (2022–2023)	7	53.8%

Note. Percentages are based on a total sample of 13 participants. "Pre-war" refers to the 2021 Fulbright cohort, who began their program before the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "During-war" includes participants from the 2022 and 2023 cohorts. Country of residence reflects the location where participants were based at the time of data collection.

We contacted the potential participants and collected the data between December 2023 and January 2024. After providing informed consent, participants were asked to compose written narratives using a multi-genre narrative approach (Daiute, 2010). They created three narratives in response to structured prompts via Qualtrics (https://www.qualtrics.com): (1) a first-person account of their experiences at the start of the invasion, (2) a letter to a family member or friend about their current life situation, and (3) a third-person fictional narrative describing a student facing circumstances similar to their own (see Appendix A for specific prompts). This genre-based design draws on the premise that different narrative forms afford distinct expressive functions. First-person narratives foreground situated identity and emotional immediacy; letters emphasize relational positioning and negotiated meaning-making; and fictional narratives enable self-distancing and imaginative engagement with complex, potentially risky topics (Daiute, 2010). Together, these genres offered participants flexible tools for negotiating tensions between personal values, civic identity, and public safety. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at CUNY Graduate Center (2023-0724-GC).

Each participant responded to each prompt, producing 39 narratives, which were subsequently broken down into 1,165 T-units. The T-unit, defined as one main clause along with any subordinate clauses or non-clausal structures attached to it (Daiute, 2014), served as the unit of analysis to honor each sentence and combination of sentences in each text and to provide a basis for consistent value coding across all genres and enable meaningful comparisons. Each T-unit was independently coded for one value, with iterative adjustments to promote coding consistency. A codebook was then developed, and a second rater was trained to assess interrater reliability by coding 10% of the dataset (118 T-units). The resulting Krippendorff's alpha for binary coding was 0.827, indicating strong agreement.

3. Results

Participants used narrative genres not merely as storytelling formats, but as tools to navigate their complex and shifting experiences during wartime. These genres—first-person narratives, letters, and third-person fiction—enabled students to adopt different stances, modulate self-disclosure, and express tensions between personal, social, and political worlds. The results of the values analysis, based on consistent coding at the T-unit level, reveal both shared values across genres and genre-specific emphases.

To make visible the layered meanings embedded in the students' accounts, we analyzed values by sentence and subsequently clustered them into five value orientations (Daiute, 2014): Coping Mechanisms are important (8 values), Interpersonal Relationships are important (7 values), Personal Well-Being and Growth are important (9 values), Recognizing and Validating the Challenges are important (13 values), and Social and Political Engagement are

important (13 values) (hereafter, "…is/are important" is implied). Each value category (e.g., 'expressing emotions') represents a pragmatic function identified by the analysts, suggesting that the narrator treats this as important. Identifying these patterns highlights how students navigate their experiences and align their narratives with different life aspects. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of values across genres, clarifying how different forms of storytelling foreground different dimensions of student experience.
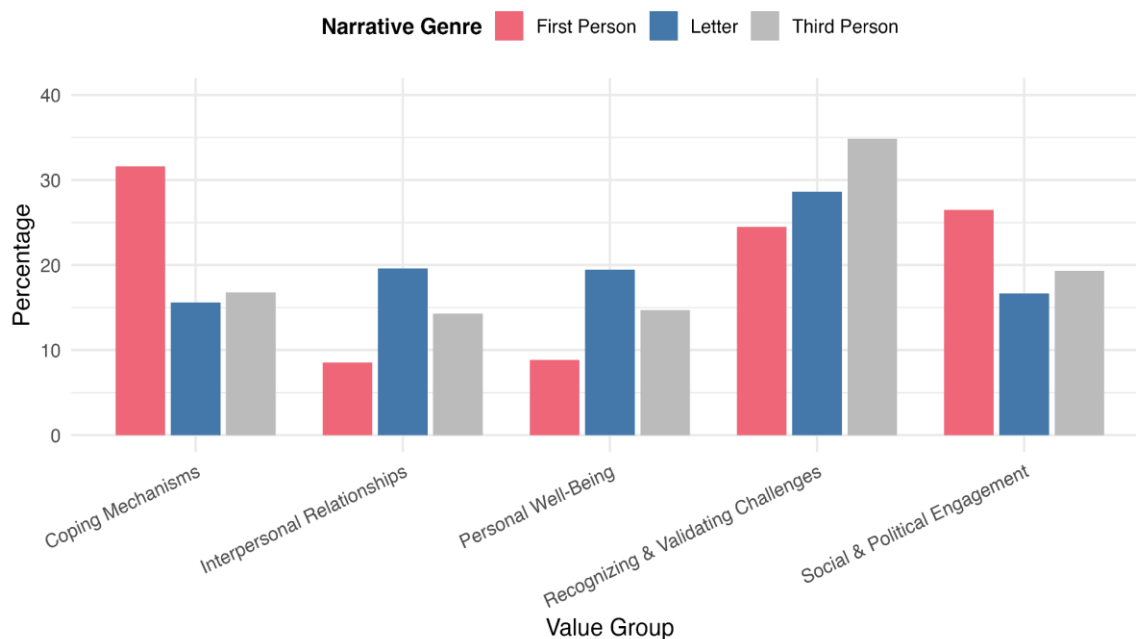

Figure 1. Value Groups by Genre

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of each value category coded within narrative genres across all T-units (N = 1,165). Each participant contributed narratives in three genres: first-person, letter, and third-person fiction. Values were inductively grouped and consistently coded at the T-unit level.

This clustering reflects what Daiute (2010) calls narrative orientations, where narratives are shaped by their contexts and purposes. Coping Mechanisms and Interpersonal Relationships indicate inward, personal orientations, focusing on emotional processing and social support. Personal Well-Being and Growth reflect developmental orientations, emphasizing resilience and transformation. Recognizing and Validating Challenges and Social and Political Engagement denote outward, collective orientations, reflecting awareness of societal issues and active civic participation. These orientations demonstrate how students' stories engage both personal and sociopolitical dimensions of their war-related experiences.

Within the five established value orientations, we will begin by identifying shared values—those expressed across all narrative genres—before turning to genre-specific patterns that reveal how participants tailored their meaning-making strategies to the affordances and implied audiences of each genre. Across all genres, the most prevalent value orientations were Recognizing and Validating the Challenges (28.67%), followed by Coping Mechanisms (20.69%) and Social and Political Engagement (20.17%). This distribution suggests that participants grappled with both internal turbulence and external pressures shaped by their geopolitical situation. These were not abstract reflections, but tangible moral, emotional, and survival dilemmas navigated through narrative.

Several values resonated across all genres. The most frequently expressed values overall were expressing emotions (10.57%), navigating uncertainty (7.17%), and capturing the rupture in normalcy (6.36%). These values appearing across all genres indicated that emotional articulation, existential disorientation, and the feeling that life has split into "before" and "after" were central to participants' wartime meaning-making. While the narrative forms varied, students consistently used them to assert emotional presence, reckon with unpredictability, and express a fraction of everyday life amid disruption.

Genre-specific patterns, however, revealed distinct emphases shaped by the affordances and implied audiences of each form. In first-person narratives, expressing emotions accounted for 14.33% of all T-units, followed by staying informed (13.18%), reflecting an inward processing of turmoil combined with a drive for external awareness about the war. In letters, expressing emotions (9.41%) and navigating uncertainty (9.23%) were nearly equally prominent, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between vulnerability and emotional control. In third-person narratives, expressing emotions remained most frequent (7.56%), closely followed by ignorance and lack of support (6.67%), indicating a more distanced commentary on social isolation and unmet needs.

To examine possible cohort differences, narrative values were compared between students who began their Fulbright programs in 2021 (pre-war cohort) and those who began in 2022–2023 (during-war cohort). Both groups emphasized the "Recognizing and Validating Challenges" value group, which accounted for the largest proportion of codes in each cohort (28.46% and 28.92%, respectively). Notable differences emerged in the value group of "Personal Well-Being and Growth", which was more than twice as prevalent in the during-war cohort (20.75%) compared to the pre-war cohort (8.70%). Conversely, the pre-war cohort demonstrated a higher proportion of Social and Political Engagement (24.95%) relative to the during-war cohort (16.19%). Other value categories showed relatively small differences, with Coping Mechanisms and Interpersonal Relationships comprising approximately 20–21% and 14–16% of each group's total coded units, respectively.

To further illustrate the cross-cohort differences in value orientations across genres, Figure 2 presents a comparative visualization of the distribution of value categories between the pre-war and during-war cohorts. This chart synthesizes patterns identified in each genre—first-person narratives, letters, and fictional accounts—highlighting genre-specific shifts in meaning-making. While both cohorts consistently emphasized recognizing and validating challenges, pre-war students more frequently articulated social and political engagement, particularly in first-person and fictional genres. In contrast, during-war students exhibited a stronger orientation toward personal well-being and coping mechanisms, suggesting a heightened need for emotional regulation amid increased sociopolitical repression.
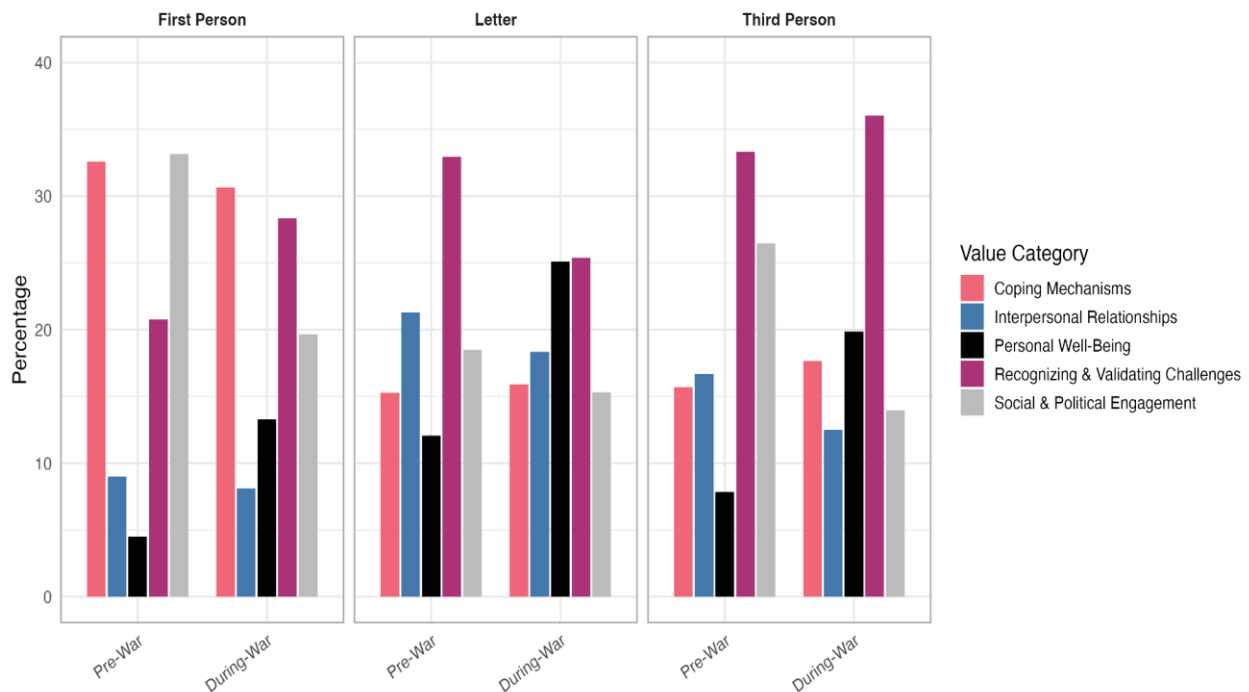

Figure 2. Distribution of value orientations across narrative genres by group (pre-war vs. during-war)

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of T-units coded for each value category within each genre and cohort.

Genre-specific trends suggest that students adapted their storytelling strategies to manage different dimensions of the conflict and their transnational position. First-person accounts offered a space for processing shock and moral rupture, while letters allowed careful relational disclosures and fictional narratives created a safer distance for critique and reflection. This distribution aligns with these students' dual roles as both war-affected individuals and

Fulbright grantees navigating expectations from multiple sides. Examples from each narrative genre across groups is offered in Appendix B.

The following sections explore how participants used each genre to express distinct constellations of values, revealing how different narrative genres shaped their emotional, social, and civic meaning-making in response to the war.

3.1 Despair and Horror

First-person narratives are powerful tools for meaning-making and social development, but in contentious situations like this study, narrators may or may not share private affective perspectives (Daiute, 2014). These narratives reveal personal experiences and interpretations of social, cultural, and historical contexts, while also exposing the tensions between emotional authenticity and the risks of open expression (Bakhtin, 1986). Values analysis identified a pattern of "Despair and Horror," where students' first-person narratives of the invasion day combined coping mechanisms (31.41%) and social and political engagement (27.38%). Coping mechanisms were prominent due to the need to express emotions (45.45%) and remain hopeful (17.27%), reflecting the immediate psychological disruption triggered by the invasion.

Simultaneously, the high percentage of social and political engagement demonstrates students' acute awareness of their civic position, narrating not only private grief, but also implicit dissent. This is exemplified in quotes such as, "The only thing I was confident about in this whole situation was that war is never the answer," where a moral stance is embedded into what appears as just a personal reflection. This dual focus highlights how narrators navigated internal emotional turmoil alongside the external expectation to conform to national loyalties. The first-person genre afforded emotional immediacy, but it also exposed narrators to the double-voiced tension between their inner convictions and anticipated judgments from real or imagined audiences (Bakhtin, 1986). These patterns reveal that even when narrating personal despair, participants were strategically positioning themselves within a broader civic and moral landscape, balancing emotional authenticity with socio-political survival (Daiute et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1978).

Regarding the pre-war (2021) and during-war (2022–2023) Fulbright cohorts, there were substantial shifts in value orientations between the groups. While both of them emphasized coping mechanisms at similar rates (32.58% pre-war vs. 30.64% during-war), stark differences emerged in other domains. The during-war cohort devoted a higher proportion of their narratives to personal well-being and growth (13.29% vs. 4.49%), suggesting intensified psychological strain and a stronger need for self-focused reflection. Conversely, social and political engagement was far more prominent in pre-war students' accounts (33.15% vs. 19.65%), indicating that those who departed Russia before the invasion felt a more prominent need to express civic agency and moral dissent. Thus, the increased inward orientation and reduced political expression in the later cohort's first-person narratives may signal a shift from a more active civic stance to one of cautious identity preservation. First-person narratives, while emotionally immediate, exposed students to the double-voiced tensions of conveying authentic experience under conditions of surveillance and exile, which were especially relevant for those who came of age during wartime.

3.2 All Apologies

Second-person narratives, such as letters to family members or friends, offer a different positioning from first-person narratives (Daiute, 2014). Unlike first-person accounts, letters presuppose an immediate and familiar audience, shaping how emotions and values are presented (Bakhtin, 1986). In this study, Fulbright students used letters to express values like Recognizing and Validating Challenges (27.87%) and Interpersonal Relationships (26.14%). This pattern, labeled "All Apologies," reflects a complex interplay between self-disclosure and social caution. The high frequency of navigating uncertainty (27.04%) and sidestepping potential discrimination (14.47%) indicates narrative adaptability, where students calibrated their self-presentation based on anticipated audience reactions and the broader sociopolitical context (Daiute et al., 2020).

Importantly, the letter genre afforded a space for relational negotiation—students could acknowledge hardship and emotional turmoil without openly challenging political norms, thus preserving relationships while protecting themselves. For instance, one student wrote:

"*There were many things I probably didn't tell you about what I went through since the war started. To start with, I lived with constant guilt and paranoia. I was ashamed to tell people where I was from*."

Here, the narrator discloses vulnerability while framing it as a personal burden rather than a political critique. This subtle balancing act reveals the strategic function of letters under repression, allowing selective emotional connection

while minimizing potential danger. As Daiute (2014) notes, narrative forms are not neutral; they enable specific kinds of meaning-making depending on context. In this case, the second-person addressivity of the letter allowed students to express suppressed emotions and maintain social ties without fully confronting the larger political crisis that shaped their experiences.

Cohort differences in letter narratives reflect a subtle shift from civic articulation to emotional survival. While both groups emphasized recognizing and validating challenges, this value was more prominent in the pre-war cohort (32.93%) than the during-war cohort (25.38%). In contrast, the during-war group placed greater emphasis on personal well-being (25.08% vs. 12.05%), suggesting a turn inward during this period of uncertainty. Social and political engagement also declined slightly from pre-war (18.47%) to during-war (15.29%) participants. Letters offered a relational space shaped by anticipated audiences (Bakhtin, 1986), allowing participants to maintain social ties while negotiating the risks of disclosure. For the during-war cohort especially, this form of writing became a way to process emotions carefully, showing how fear and exhaustion may have made them more hesitant to express their civic views openly.

3.3 No One to Support

Third-person narratives position narrators within a broader social context while maintaining emotional distance. This genre allowed participants to explore politically sensitive topics, such as national stigma, exile, and sanctions, without directly exposing themselves (Daiute, 2010). The prominence of navigating and validating challenges (33.19%) suggests a collective orientation: by fictionalizing their experiences, students articulated shared grievances while shielding their personal vulnerability.

The importance of ignorance, lack of support, and unfair sanctions enacted with the narratives connects to critical engagement with both Western and Russian audiences, voicing frustration about their stigmatized identity. For example, one narrative observed:

"*Then came the uncomfortable awareness that a hundred thousand eyes perceived you as Russian, instigating unease and wariness. Questions of self-identity emerged, accompanied by thoughts of guilt and how to grapple with this imposed burden.*"

Using fictional framing, the author externalizes personal fear as part of a broader social dilemma, illustrating how third-person storytelling enables subtle civic critique while preserving emotional safety.

Moreover, the relatively high proportion of Social and Political Engagement values (19.33%) in this genre highlights that fiction provided a strategic platform for analyzing systemic injustices. By distancing themselves from direct autobiography, participants could address complex issues—such as moral responsibility, exile, and collective guilt—without appearing accusatory or disloyal.

These patterns underscore that participants' narratives were not merely acts of emotional catharsis but dynamic mediational tools (Daiute, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Students strategically used genre affordances to negotiate the risks of expression within a repressive political context. First-person narratives enabled emotional immediacy but were marked by careful self-censorship; letters mediated relational loyalties and fears of surveillance; and fictional stories provided greater narrative freedom to critique, imagine, or distance personal risk. Across these genres, students responded not only to the imagined repression of their homeland, but also to the subtle pressures of being viewed as representatives of an aggressor nation within their host communities.

Fictional narratives revealed subtle yet telling shifts in how students engaged with collective trauma and civic complexity. Both cohorts prioritized recognizing and validating challenges, with slightly higher rates in the during-war group (36.03%) than the pre-war group (33.33%). However, other patterns suggest more distinct shifts. Personal well-being appeared nearly three times more frequently in during-war students' stories (19.85% vs. 7.84%), echoing trends seen in their first-person and letter narratives, and pointing to a broader inward turn in response to heightened distress. In contrast, social and political engagement was notably higher in the pre-war cohort (26.47%) than during-war (13.97%), indicating that fiction, though offering a protective narrative distance, was used more confidently by pre-war students for civic critique and moral reflection.

This aligns with Daiute's (2017) notion of genre as symbolic refuge and Bakhtin's (1986) concept of addressivity and double-voiced discourse, suggesting that fiction afforded students a way to speak about politically sensitive topics without direct exposure. Yet even in this safer space, the during-war cohort appeared more guarded, perhaps reflecting intensified fear of surveillance or internalized pressure to remain neutral. For them, fiction functioned less

as a platform for dissent and more as a tool for emotional management under symbolic threat. Participants tailored their narratives to anticipate multiple audiences, balancing sincerity and self-protection across shifting relational fields. These narrative practices reveal how meaning-making, civic positioning, and identity reconstruction unfolded under conditions of fear, exile, and moral conflict.

4. Discussion

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented political exodus from Russia. Among the hundreds of thousands who fled, scholars identify "a relatively small but active group of civic activists, politicians, journalists, and researchers" building new projects abroad (Domanska & Ingvarsson, 2023, p.2). These emigrants have established independent media, democracy-focused initiatives, and aid efforts for Ukraine (Bouchet, 2024). Some observers even describe these communities as a relocated public sphere—informal laboratories where alternative civic norms are taking root (Bouchet, 2024). In this sense, the civic values expressed in the narratives of Russian Fulbright students' parallel broader diasporic efforts to cultivate democratic culture beyond Russia's borders.

However, this diaspora is far from unified. Analyses emphasize ideological fractures: some exiles embrace full-throated activism, while others advocate moderation or prioritize cultural outreach (Makarychev, 2024). Ukrainian officials have also noted that Russian émigré activists often act individually, without unified platforms (Activatica, 2024). Moreover, migration researchers find that strong personal or professional ties to Russia can dampen political engagement abroad (Zavadskaya et al., 2024). We found this tension to be evident—Fulbright students frequently voiced civic aspirations, but they modulated their activism due to fears about potential future repercussions. Their narratives revealed a careful balancing act of holding democratic ideals while navigating the risks tied to eventual return to Russia.

This dual dynamic aligns with the broader literature on Russian exile. Exit and voice are not mutually exclusive; rather, emigrants often sustain critical engagement while exercising strategic restraint (Zavadskaya et al., 2024). The Fulbright cohort mirrors this tension: committed to civic ideals promoted by Fulbright's mission, yet tempered by concerns for personal safety and professional futures in an increasingly repressive Russia (Zavadskaya et al., 2024). Their ambivalent positioning—neither fully free like diasporic activists nor fully silenced like citizens inside Russia—marks them as a unique transitional group.

Our cross-cohort analysis adds further nuance to this transitional positioning. While all students balanced personal expression with political caution, the pre-war cohort more openly engaged in social and political reflection, particularly in first-person and fictional narratives. In contrast, the during-war cohort showed a marked shift toward personal well-being and emotional coping, especially in first-person and letter genres. This difference may reflect the rapidly intensifying climate of fear after the February 2022 invasion—unlike the during-war group, pre-war students had not yet experienced the full extent of state repression and surveillance, such as criminal liability for dissent or the collapse of academic freedom. This relative temporal distance may have afforded them greater confidence in articulating civic concerns.

Similar patterns have been observed in other authoritarian contexts, where timing and exposure to repression shape young people's willingness to engage politically (Bee, 2019; Zavadskaya et al., 2024). As Bakhtin (1986) and Daiute (2014) argue, genres become strategic tools for meaning-making, especially in conflict settings where expression is always negotiated. In this light, the cohort-based differences in narrative focus reveal not just psychological variation, but also shifts in perceived civic risk and expressive possibility.

Within Russia itself, overt civic dissent has been brutally suppressed. Initial antiwar protests in early 2022 were met with mass detentions, new laws criminalizing dissent, and widespread academic purges (TableMedia, 2024). The pervasive fear of denunciation has created a culture of self-censorship, pushing even those privately opposed to the war into silence. Thus, while Russian Fulbright students abroad still risk significant consequences, their partial separation from direct state control affords them greater—though still cautious—space for reflective civic engagement.

The experiences of Russian Fulbright students resonate with findings from other contexts where emerging adults in aggressor states grapple with the consequences of their nation's military actions. For instance, research on young people in post-9/11 U.S. contexts illustrates how geopolitical conflicts can catalyze civic engagement. Many young Americans opposing the Iraq War became highly politically active, leveraging both in-person protests and digital activism to express dissent (Moffett et al., 2014). While Russian Fulbright students lack the same freedom to critique their government openly, especially because they have to go back to Russia after the end of their program, they too demonstrate a desire for civic participation in less confrontational ways (Fisher, 2024). Their engagement with social

and political issues often takes the form of reflective storytelling and support, both within the community and towards the victims of this war, fostering resilience and moral coherence amidst the constraints of authoritarianism.

In pre-invasion Russia, youth exhibited "civic passivity," prioritizing personal and academic goals over political engagement (Snezhkova, 2021). However, our results demonstrate that the invasion of Ukraine has heightened the moral and emotional stakes for Russian Fulbright students, leading many to question their national identity and adopt new forms of civic engagement, such as advocating for democratic values or supporting anti-war initiatives. These findings parallel the experiences of young people in Bosnia and Rwanda, where inherited emotions like guilt and shame shaped their civic behaviors, often motivating reconciliation efforts or intergroup dialogue (Brown & Cehajic, 2008; McLean Hilker, 2014).

The Fulbright students' narratives also underscore the fraught relationship between national identity and civic values. Like post-war Bosnian Serb youth grappling with collective shame (Brown & Cehajic, 2008) or Rwandan youth navigating official narratives of unity (McLean Hilker, 2014), Russian students face a profound identity crisis: how to reconcile belonging to a perpetrator nation with their personal opposition to state violence.

Emotions like shame and guilt appeared across participants' stories, but these feelings were not ends in themselves; rather, they served as catalysts for rethinking civic commitments. Prior research shows that group-based guilt, when not suppressed, can promote reparative action (Brown & Cehajic, 2008). Similarly, the students' accounts suggest that their moral discomfort fostered empathy, solidarity with victims, and a cautious search for ways to uphold civic values despite personal risks.

Fulbright students inhabit a liminal position between Russians still inside the authoritarian system and Russians who have freely exited into exile. Unlike most Russians who must suppress dissent to avoid persecution (Kurbak, 2024), and unlike many exiles who can fully express opposition (Grigoryan et al., 2024), Fulbright participants exist in a suspended civic state: they want to act, but the uncertainty of their return prospects imposes caution. This in-betweenness—captured vividly in narratives oscillating between fear, hope, and muted dissent—defines their unique moral and civic positioning.

In this context, the students' use of cautious storytelling and their subtle forms of moral resistance illustrate how narrative itself operates as a mediational tool under authoritarian pressure. Their accounts do not simply describe civic dilemmas; they actively manage them. Through shifts in genre, careful calibrations of voice, and selective disclosures, participants negotiated what could be expressed, what had to be muted, and how their civic values could still be signaled without triggering danger. These narrative strategies reflect the broader logic of expression under repression: meaning is not only communicated, but also protected, shaped, and constrained by fear and moral obligation. In this sense, the Fulbright students' narratives demonstrate how civic identity is crafted through storytelling that is simultaneously expressive and defensive—a form of mediated civic action uniquely shaped by authoritarian conditions.

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

These findings highlight both the possibilities and precarities of civic identity development among Russian Fulbright students during a period of geopolitical crisis. However, important limitations in sampling and methodology warrant consideration. First, the small sample of 13 participants limits statistical generalizability. Second, we rely on self-reported narratives, which are subject to memory constraints, social desirability pressures, and self-presentation strategies (Tourangeau et al., 2000). Future research focused specifically on Russian Fulbright students or comparable Russian international student groups could strengthen these insights by pairing narrative analysis with quantitative measures of civic orientation—such as the Civic Engagement Scale (CES; Doolittle & Faul, 2013) and the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talo & Mannarini, 2015)—to assess whether democratic-context civic instruments adequately capture civic development in non-democratic regimes. Comparative studies could also examine whether similar patterns emerge among students from other aggressor states, but such work would need to be grounded in those specific contexts rather than inferred from the present findings.

4.2 Conclusion

The narratives of Russian Fulbright students reveal a civic consciousness forged at the crossroads of war, exile, and authoritarian constraint. Their reflections illustrate both the fragility and resilience of civic identity formation under duress. Positioned between Russia's repressive present and the tentative hope of global democratic norms, they model an emergent form of engaged citizenship, shaped not by loud protest, but by careful storytelling, solidarity with victims, and private but potent moral resistance. Their experiences offer a small but significant glimpse into how conscience can survive—and even begin to rebuild—in the shadow of national aggression.

5. Acknowledgement

References

Activatica. (2024, August 12). *Zhizn' i smert' v prifrontovykh gorodakh Ukrainy* [Life and death in Ukrainian frontline cities] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaHUhwzYcyM

Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What Do We Mean By "Civic Engagement"? *Journal of Transformative Education, 3*(3), 236-253. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). The problem of speech genres. In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 60-102). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. https://doi.org/10.7560/720466-005

Brunton-Smith, I., & Barrett, M. (2015). Political and civic participation: Findings from the modelling of existing survey data sets. In M. Barrett & B. Zani (Eds.), *Political and civic engagement: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 195–212). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Bouchet, N. (2024). *Democratic Russian civil society outside Russia? A window of opportunity for support.* ReThink.Democracy, The German Marshall Fund of the United States. https://www.gmfus.org/news/democratic-russian-civil-society-outside-russia-window-opportunity-support

Bee, C. (2019). The civic and political participation of young people in a context of heightened authoritarianism. The case of Turkey. *Journal of Youth Studies, 24*(1), 40-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1683523

Brown, R., & Cehajic, S. (2008). Dealing with the past and facing the future: Mediators of the effects of collective guilt and shame in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 38*(4), 669-684. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.466

Daiute, C., Stern, R., & Lelutiu-Weinberger, C. (2003). Negotiating Violence Prevention. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*, 83-101. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00006

Daiute, C. (2010). *Human development and political violence.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511779725

Daiute, C. (2014). *Narrative inquiry: A dynamic approach.* SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544365442

Daiute, C., & Kovacs-Cerovic, T. (2017). *Minority teachers: Roma in Serbia: Narrate education reform.* Belgrade, Serbia: Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade and the Association of Pedagogical Assistants.

Daiute, C., Kovács Cerović, T., Mićić, K., Sullu, B., & Vracar, S. (2020). Dynamic values negotiating geo-political narratives across a migration system. *Qualitative Psychology, 7*(3), 367-383. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000166

Daiute, C. (2017). Narrating refuge. *Europe's Journal of Psychology, 13*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v13i1.1386

Dar, A. A., & Deb, S. (2022). Prevalence of trauma among young adults exposed to stressful events of armed conflicts in South Asia: Experiences from Kashmir. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 14*(4), 633-641. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001045

Domanska, M., & Ingvarsson, S. (2023, November 15). *Russia in exile: Support for Russian political migrants as an instrument to increase European security* (SCEEUS Report No. 16). Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies. https://sceeus.se/en/publications/russia-in-exile-support-for-russian-political-migrants/

Doolittle, A., & Faul, A. C. (2013). Civic Engagement Scale: A Validation Study. *Sage Open, 3*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013495542

Fazackerley, A. (2022, March 6). *Russians at UK universities "lonely and guilty" as they fear for the future.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/mar/06/russians-at-uk-universities-lonely-and-guilty-as-they-fear-for-the-future

Flanagan, S. C., & Lee, A.-R. (2003). The New Politics, Culture Wars, and The Authoritarian-Libertarian Value Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies. *Comparative Political Studies, 36*(3), 235-270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414002250664

Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 159-179. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0043

Fisher, K. (2024, April 29). *Winning a Fulbright Was a High Honor for Russians. Now It Could Jeopardize Scholars Who Go Home.* Chronicle. https://www.chronicle.com/article/winning-a-fulbright-was-a-high-honor-for-russians-now-it-could-jeopardize-scholars-who-go-home

Fulbright, Fulbright Program. (2023, March 23). T*he Fulbright Program for citizens of the Russian Federation.* https://www.fulbrightprogram.org/sg-edu/

Gleichgewicht, D. (2023, August 7). *Why it is not just Putin's war: The collective responsibility of Russians.* New Eastern Europe. https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/08/07/why-it-is-not-just-putins-war-the-collective-responsibility-of-russians/

Grigoryan, L., Ponizovskiy, V., … Weißflog, M. I. (2024). Guilt, shame, and antiwar action in an authoritarian country at war. *Political Psychology, 00*. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12985

Hyland, P., Vallières, F., Shevlin, M., Karatzias, T., Ben-Ezra, M., McElroy, E., Vang, M. L., Lorberg, B., & Martsenkovskyi, D. (2023). Psychological consequences of war in Ukraine: assessing changes in mental health among Ukrainian parents. *Psychological Medicine, First View,* 1-3. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291723000818

Kamalov, E., Kostenko, V., Sergeeva, I., & Zavadskaya, M. (2023, June). *New Russian migrants against the war: Political action in Russia and abroad* (Series "The Russian Crisis," Paper #5). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/76527

Kurbak, M. (2024). Imagining the future – rejecting the present: Future thought and defensive discourse strategies in Russian society during wartime. *Memory, Mind & Media, 3*(14). https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2024.12

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353

Makarychev, A. (2024). The Popular Geopolitics of the Russian Diaspora in Estonia: Gaps, Cleavages, Disconnections. *Russian Analytical Digest, 316*, 5-9. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000692533

Maxwell, J.A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.

McElroy, E., Hyland, P., Shevlin, M., Karatzias, T., Vallières, F., Ben-Ezra, M., Vang, M. L., Lorberg, B., & Martsenkovskyi, D. (2023). Change in child mental health during the Ukraine war: evidence from a large sample of parents. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-023-02255-z

McLean Hilker, L. C. (2014). Navigating adolescence and young adulthood in Rwanda during and after genocide: intersections of ethnicity, gender and age. *Children's Geographies, 12*(3), 354-368. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2014.913784

Moffett, K. W., Rice, L. L., & Madupalli, R. (2014). Young Voters and War: The Iraq War as a Catalyst for Political Participation. *Social Science Quarterly, 95*(5). https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12116

Musisi, S., & Kinyanda, E. (2020). Long-Term Impact of War, Civil War, and Persecution in Civilian Populations—Conflict and Post-Traumatic Stress in African Communities. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00020

Notion. (2022). *Joint Statement of Russian Students and alumni abroad on the war the Russian government launched.* https://www.notion.so/Joint-Statement-of-Russian-students-and-alumni-abroad-on-the-war-the-Russian-govern ment-launched-aga-af98202c1362425fba4cb2f15d44d3c7?pvs=4

Osokina, O., Silwal, S., Bohdanova, T., Hodes, M., Sourander, A., & Skokauskas, N. (2023). Impact of the Russian Invasion on Mental Health of Adolescents in Ukraine. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 62*(3), 335-343. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2022.07.845

Pohorilov, S. (2023, July 28). *Almost 80% of Ukrainians consider all Russians responsible for war.* Ukrainska Pravda. https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/07/28/7413240/

Priebe, S., Jankovic Gavrilovic, J., Bremner, S., Ajdukovic, D., Franciskovic, T., Galeazzi, G. M., Kucukalic, A., Lecic-Tosevski, D., Morina, N., Popovski, M., Schützwohl, M., & Bogic, M. (2012). Psychological Symptoms as Long-Term Consequences of War Experiences. *Psychopathology, 46*(1), 45-54. https://doi.org/10.1159/000338640

Rapoport, A. (2008). Exchange programs for educators: American and Russian perspectives. *Intercultural Education, 19*(1). Informa UK Limited. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980701852418

Reed, B. (2024, January 11). *'Spymania' sees Russia accuse US of plan to meddle in its election.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/11/russia-election-us-spymania-svr

Snezhkova, I. (2021). Russian Youth about Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus - Images of Countries and Peoples. *Proceedings of CBU in Social Sciences, 2*, 318-324. https://doi.org/10.12955/pss.v2.240

Soboleva, V. (2024, April 24). *Fulbright Scholars are trapped in a Catch-22.* Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/04/24/fulbright-scholar-home-residency-waiver/

Spatz, E. (2023, March 16). *"These people would rather die than give up": Russian and Ukrainian students reflect one year into war.* The Huntington News. https://huntnewsnu.com/70921/campus/these-people-would-rather-die-than-give-up-russian-and-ukrainian-students-reflect-one-year-into-war/

TableMedia. (2024, August 1). *Repression grows in Russian universities.* Science|Business. https://sciencebusiness.net/news/universities/repression-grows-russian-universities

Talò, C., & Mannarini, T. (2015). Measuring Participation: Development and Validation the Participatory Behaviors Scale. *Social Indicators Research, 123*(3), 799-816 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0761-0

TASS. (2022, March 7). *Russian government approves list of unfriendly countries and territories.* TASS. https://tass.com/politics/1418197

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations.* Brooks/Cole.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wang, W. (2022, July 10). *Russian SU students face social obscurities since invasion of Ukraine.* The Daily Orange. https://www.dailyorange.com/2022/07/russian-syracuse-university-students-ukraine-invasion

Yates, M., & Youniss, J. (1998). Community service and political-moral identity in adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*(2), 203-222. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327795jra0802_2

Zavadskaya, M., Kamalov, E., & Sergeeva, I. (2024). Voice after Exit? Exploring Patterns of Civic Activism among Russian Migrant Communities in Eurasia after 24 February 2022. In A.-L. Heusala, K. Aitamurtoand S. Eraliev (eds) *Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe.* Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-26-8

Appendix A

Narrative Prompts

1. Narrate your experience about the day when the Russian invasion of Ukraine started

Please take a few moments and recollect memories about the day you heard it was happening. Share this moment, your feelings and actions.

2. Letter to a family member or friend back in Russia

Write a letter to a family member or a friend about your life now, how it has changed since the beginning of the war.

3. Write a story about a Russian Fulbright student during the war

Tell a story about a Russian International student in 2022. What do they feel? What is their daily life like?

Appendix B

Examples of Narratives Across the Groups

Narrative Genre	Examples	
	Pre-war group	During-war group
First person	"I could not believe it happened. As I continued scrolling, I was getting closer to a panic attack and then I just burst into tears. It was hard to breathe. I did have a panic attack I think. Shortly after, I found out there would be a rally to support Ukraine and protest the Russian invasion, and that would go from the Times Square to the 90th street where Consulate General of the Russian Federation in New York was. One of the fellow Fulbrighters from Ukraine that I had met earlier messaged me and asked me if I'd go. I told her I would."	"Since then [winning the Fulbright], I wanted to hurry time—just so we could leave before the country was completely closed off and my boyfriend got drafted to the front. His sister and I even made plans for how we would hide him from mobilization. Time passed heavily. The depression and anxiety grew stronger each day. In September, we finally left the country. I hoped things would be better in the U.S. But in reality, it turned out to be the opposite."
Letter	"Now, you and I don't talk about it at all, but when the war started, I'll never forget how both of you practically yelled at me during one of our video calls in Skype. You said I was brainwashed by the bullshit that western media shows, and I think that's when I started crying. For the first couple of months, it was really hard to have a conversation with you that wouldn't end up with arguing. There were many times when I wanted to cut off connection with you completely and stop talking to you for at least 3 months. But I didn't do it, as you know."	"It's been 1,5 years since I left and can't really feel it, although I acknowledge that a lot has changed since that time. I think now I grew tired of this war and the narratives about 'all Russians are responsible for it' and bla-bla. I used to be very pro-Ukrainian at the beginning, you know. Right up unitl the moment I met real Ukrainians here in the US. Having spent some time with actual Ukrainians, I realized that a lot of them are blinded by their new 'holy' status. A lot of them are hostile towards you just because you have a Russian passport."
Third person	"In 2022, a Russian international student was the last one to introduce themselves in their first class. When they said their name and the country they were from, there was awkward silence in the zoom meeting and the professor said "I'm sorry for what you're going through" and added something reassuring to the student to let them know no one was judging them. The Russian student also got asked how their family was doing back there, whether they were safe, etc. Someone in class even made a joke once like "You're from Russia? Don't worry, I still like you""	"In 2022 when I had to get to the US, I had nothing apart from 1,000 dollars in cash. Why cash? Oh, because of sanctions Russian credit and debit cards did not work, so I could not even pay for my rent. Did it stop Putin? Of course not. Did it make the lives of thousands of people worse, especially poor international students? Oh yeah."

Note. Examples illustrate how participants used different narrative genres (first-person, letter, and third-person fiction) to express their experiences and perspectives related to the war. Each genre allowed for distinct positioning of self and voice in relation to personal, social, and political realities.

Copyrights